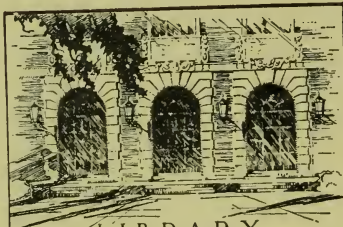


AN ENTHUSIAST

CAROLINE FOTHERGILL





LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823
F828e
v. 1



*never saw
with love from
C. F.*

AN ENTHUSIAST.

BY

CAROLINE FOTHERGILL,

AUTHOR OF

"PUT TO THE PROOF," "THE SECOND BEST," "FOES OF A HOUSEHOLD."

"'Tis an awkward thing to play with souls."

R. BROWNING.

THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

London :

WARD AND DOWNEY,

12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN.

1887.

[All rights reserved.]

LONDON:
PRINTED BY GILBERT AND RIVINGTON, LIMITED,
ST. JOHN'S SQUARE.

823

F828e

v. 1

BOOK I.

STANEDALE.

"The Blossom in the Bud."

Renewed since 23 March 1912

AN ENTHUSIAST.



PROLOGUE.

THE pedestrian who had wandered into the little village church, and, weary after a long walk in the hot sun, had fallen asleep in the cool dimness of the organ-loft, woke suddenly and rubbed his eyes. He was sufficiently awake to be conscious that the words which he heard some one reading in a measured, monotonous voice, were part of the marriage service, but he felt no curiosity about the people who were being married. He did not at any time find villagers very interesting, and now he was still too drowsy to raise his head and look

down into the church. He closed his eyes and dozed off again, still hearing as in a dream the voice of the clergyman, exhorting the man and woman who stood before him. Then the voice ceased, steps came along the aisle, he heard the people go into the vestry, from which they presently came out again and left the church. Once more that unbroken silence prevailed which had reigned when he had first stepped into the building; but it lasted a very short time. Before he fell asleep again he was roused, and this time thoroughly, by a sudden peal of laughter which broke in upon the sleepy stillness of a July morning, which is on the point of merging into afternoon, and rang through the empty old church. It was a girl's laughter,—about that, there could be no mistake,—and whoever she was, she must have been very much amused at something,

for she went on laughing in an uncontrollable, ecstatic manner, which seemed strange amid such surroundings. It was wonderful laughter, so rippling, so melodious, and so full of enjoyment. The man in the organ-loft listened spellbound; he felt that he would never forget that laughter; if he heard it again after twenty years he would recognize it. Moreover, his curiosity was roused at last. It was impossible such laughter as that could come from the throat of a common village girl; he resolved to get up and go and see what had happened. But when he got downstairs, he found the church door was already locked; the sound had come to his ears through the open windows. By the time his knocking and shaking at the door had been heard, and the clerk had come to set him free, his mood had changed, and he was too heated and out of

temper to make any inquiries concerning the marriage which had just taken place. He shook the dust off his feet, and went his way to the next place on the programme of the walking tour which he was making. Other thoughts came to obliterate the memory of what had just taken place, only, as his ill-humour worked itself off, he remembered more and more clearly those peals of laughter which had sounded from the churchyard, and he enjoyed the thought that if ever Fate brought him across the path of this unknown, unseen bride, whose marriage seemed to cause her such amusement, he would be able at once to identify her.

CHAPTER I.

“ When day with evening blending
Sinks from the summer sky,
I’ve seen thy spirit bending
In fond idolatry.”

“ In summer’s mellow midnight.”

THE sun was setting over Stanedale Pike with a ruddy brilliance which promised a fine day for the morrow. Everything was bathed in the clear evening light, and stood out against the stainless blue of the sky with a clearness of outline not observable in the daytime. Distant objects looked near; the farms scattered over the fell-sides were more clearly distinguishable from the moors and fields which surrounded them—one might almost have counted the

cattle and sheep as they moved about in their pastures. Under these circumstances a woman clad in white and seated in the midst of those darkly purple moors upon which the setting sun shone directly, must have been a very conspicuous object. She sat upon a heap of turf, her feet resting on the heather, her chin supported upon her hand, gazing across the valley to the huge Pike, the summit of which still glowed in the ruddy light, though the rest of its surface lay in the shadow and looked almost threateningly dark as compared with the rest of the country.

She could scarcely have looked upon a more beautiful scene. Round her lay the moors, fringed on the horizon with a line of firs; below her lay woods, heavy in the sombre green of their late summer foliage; beyond the woods came wide sloping green fields, and then the lake, an exquisitely

beautiful sheet of water, now lying motionless, half in light and half in shadow. On the other side of the water were more fields and a few scattered houses forming the village of Stanedale, the whole backed up by the Pike and other hills of no great height, perhaps, as compared with mountains not on English soil, but showing grandly amid their actual surroundings. That was what she saw when she looked straight before her ; if she turned her eyes to the right, she saw the head of the lake, shut in by rugged heath-clad screes ; to the left she saw down the water—its whole extent lay before her to where at Lake Foot it slipped away in a silently gliding stream.

The woman herself, who sat looking at all this beauty, drinking it in with eyes and senses, was just as beautiful in her own way. She was tall—that was plain

even when she was sitting down—and there was wonderful grace in her bending attitude, with one elbow supported on her knee, and the other hand hanging loosely by her side. Her face was a very striking one, with a great deal of power, and power of no common order, in its chiselled features. The mouth and chin, expressive at once of strength and tenderness, were marvellously beautiful; golden hair was loosely coiled on top of her head, and then by some freak of nature her eyes, eyelashes, and eyebrows were jet-black—the eyebrows very delicately pencilled, and forming two level lines upon her forehead; the eyes were very peculiar, deep and soft, but lit up at times by a gleam which suggested that the spirit of all evil had made his abode in the girl's soul. The whole face was animated by a humorous look which showed that its

owner was wont to regard life in general rather as a comedy than a tragedy. Only a very careful observer would have seen indications in this beautiful face of a strange spirit of yielding and dependence, which existed side by side with other and very opposite characteristics. Just now she was absorbed in watching the sun set; she had spent a perfect day upon the moors, she was seeing the day fade into as perfect an evening, and the transformation-scene stirred the deepest part of her nature.

The sun sank behind the Pike, and a kind of shadowy chill fell upon the earth—it looked a face from which a smile had vanished. After sitting for a few minutes longer, her eyes fixed upon the lake, the hue of which had suddenly changed from silver to leaden, the girl rose to her feet and prepared to go.

She picked up her hat, which lay on the ground beside her, took the little basket in her hand, and began to tread the rough, stony road which led down into the valley. She walked very slowly, often pausing to look around her, or to gather a flower, or a bunch of leaves, which she put into her basket. Once she took out her watch, and smiled as she said aloud, for in those lonely roads there was no one to overhear her,—

“Late! but the domestic constitution will be so convulsed with the arrival of the distinguished stranger that my irregularity may pass unnoticed.”

She continued her walk not less leisurely than before. She had now reached the high-road which went round the lake, so put on her hat, though she still left her gloves in the bottom of her basket. She skirted the lake for some little distance

and passed through the village, which had not yet developed a street, then she turned down a road leading to the lake, with fields on one side and rippling beck on the other. At one point the stream was spanned by an old ivy-hung bridge, which had to be crossed before you got to the old greystone house called Beckbridge. This house was built in the shadow of the Pike, and commanded a beautiful view of the lake and the moors. There was a great deal of ground belonging to the house, all of which, except that immediately surrounding the building, was in a very wild, uncultivated condition.

In the dining-room of this house at this same moment, four people were seated at the tea-table—Mr. Richardson, his two daughters, and a man, a guest, who had arrived an hour earlier.

Mr. Richardson was a noble-looking old

man, tall and white-haired, with large and rather irregular, though very powerful features. His face always wore a thoughtful and rather absent expression, and his lips parted frequently in a humorous smile. His eldest daughter, Marion, who sat opposite to him, was a tall girl with a beautiful face, and more dignity than grace of manner and carriage. There was always a frown upon her forehead, and her lips were often drawn together in rather a straight line. Marion had grievances, and thought that her lot in life was rather hard. Her mother had died nine years before, when she was sixteen, and Marion, with all the enthusiasm of which her nature was capable, had determined to supply her place with her father, and make him, if possible, forget his wife's loss. She had not succeeded. Her father and she had little in common, and after resisting his

daughter's consolations for some time, he put her and her sister under the temporary care of their aunt, and went from home. He wandered over the greater part of the world, and when he came home, after an absence of five years, he brought with him what only served to widen the gap between his daughter and himself. Ethel, the younger girl, was two years Marion's junior, like her sister, on a small and insignificant scale, and closely attached to her.

The guest was Stephen Knox, a man whom Mr. Richardson and his daughters had met in the early summer at a watering place where they had spent a short time. He had paid Marion a great deal of attention, and a few days before this particular one had written to suggest a short visit to Stanedale, basing his claim on some rather vague words of Mr. Richardson's, uttered at parting, and for-

gotten as soon as spoken. The visit was regarded by Marion and her sister as an event of great importance in their quiet lives, and Stephen's manner on meeting Marion again had certainly given considerable colour to their suppositions. But nothing definite had yet been said.

To these four people came in the girl who had been sitting on the moors watching the sun set. She came in with the graceful, gliding step peculiar to her, and took the empty place between Ethel and Mr. Richardson. He stretched out his hand to her under cover of the tablecloth, and she pressed it, saying with rather a deprecating little smile,—

“I am a wretch, I know.”

“I cannot contradict you,” he replied.

They exchanged a few more remarks quite to themselves, and then she turned to take her cup of tea from Ethel's hand.

But she gave so little attention to what she was doing, being in fact absorbed in her conversation with Mr. Richardson, that the cup slipped in the saucer, and but for a timely effort on Ethel's part, must have fallen on to the table. Marion watched the trifling incident narrowly, and when the cup had been safely placed on the table, said, with a deepening of her habitual frown,—

“I wish you would be more careful, Maryla. You almost spilt your tea.”

“I suppose there is more in the pot,” just turning her face to the speaker, and her voice sounded provokingly careless. Marion's lips tightened as she replied,—

“You do not seem to reflect that a cupful of tea poured on to the tablecloth would not improve its appearance.”

“Surely this is not the only tablecloth we have got,” smiling in a way which suggested amused toleration, and could

scarcely fail to be irritating to Marion. But this little conversation brought her attention to what was going on around her, and she said,—

“ Won’t you introduce me to your friend ? ”

“ Certainly,” said Marion, rather stiffly ; “ Mr. Knox, Miss Goldengay—papa’s ward,” she added in explanation.

Miss Goldengay and Mr. Knox bowed, exchanged a few trifling remarks, and then the girl returned to her interrupted conversation with Mr. Richardson, while Mr. Knox resumed his with Marion and her sister.

When tea was over, they all went into the drawing-room. Marion and Ethel each took up some needlework. Maryla hung aimlessly about for some little time, turning over the books and papers which lay on the various tables, leaned out of the open

window for a minute or two, uttered more than one deep sigh, and finally left the room. She did not appear again during the evening. Even when candles were lighted and good-nights exchanged, she was not forthcoming. Stephen felt a little offended as he went upstairs; he was accustomed to be treated with a great deal of respect.

The guest-chamber in which he was lodged was at the front of the house, and the first thing he did when he reached it was to go to the window, draw up the blind, and look out. The full moon was shining, and he felt the tiny yellow flame of his candle to be very unnecessary, so he put it out, and then found that the room was almost as light as in the daytime. The window was slightly open, he pushed it up as high as it would go, and leaned out into the night, drinking in the cool air

and exquisite perfumes of a country midnight, while his eyes wandered over the view before him. The lake lay in the moonlight, looking like a sheet of molten silver, the wide moors spread themselves out in its radiance, the trees stood motionless. The only sound which came to his ears was the rush of the beck, near the house, as it hastened over the stones to the lake. It was impossible not to feel that it would be a sin to go to bed on such a night; besides, Mr. Knox seemed still to hear in his ears the roar of the train in which he had spent so many hours that day; his pulses were still beating more rapidly than usual, with the pleasurable excitement of his arrival and meeting with Marion. He wanted a little time for reflection, and what time could be better than this still moonlight night, when every one but himself would be in bed and asleep and he seemed

for the moment to have the whole world to himself ?

His thoughts ran chiefly on Marion. He had admired her very much when he had first made her acquaintance in a hotel ; to-day, when he saw her for the first time in her own home, he admired her still more. He had every intention of asking her to be his wife, and from many signs which he, as a lover, had interpreted in only one way, he did not anticipate a refusal. She was a queenly creature he told himself, an English girl of the best type ; with an English girl's beauty, luxuriant brown hair, and clear grey eyes. He thought of her grave, dignified manner, cold and reserved with strangers, but with him, the chosen one, thawing half shyly, half unresistingly. He thought of her pale, proud face, told over in his mind her pure, fair features, and heaved a sigh of content

as he thought that on the day when he pleased he could call all these his own. He could scarcely understand how he had found such a peerless creature still fancy-free. He lost himself in a dream from which he was roused suddenly by the oldest, craziest set of chimes he had ever heard. They rang out from the old church tower, and after a pause the clock struck one. He pulled out his watch and mechanically compared London time with that which regulated the movements of Stanedale, and then sank back into his dreams.

He did not know how long this second dream had lasted before he was roused again, this time by hearing the gate in the garden below, swing upon its hinges and fall softly to. He started up, wondering if in a place like Stanedale thieves could possibly break through and steal when

honest folks were supposed to be asleep and off their guard.

With the idea in his mind that thieves were possible, he drew back and looked from behind his curtains very cautiously, and he needed all his presence of mind to prevent the exclamation which rose to his lips becoming audible and drawing attention to himself.

The person who had come in at the gate, and was now standing in the middle of the drive, looking around her, was no other than Miss Goldengay herself. There could not possibly be any mistake. Even in this short time, Mr. Knox felt familiar with the tall, slender figure in a white dress and the beautiful gold-crowned head. She stood perfectly still, her hands clasped before her, her head slightly lifted and turned so that he could see her profile.

Mr. Knox was silent from sheer amaze-

ment. What in the name of fortune, he thought, was she doing out at that hour, and alone? Where had she been? What was Mr. Richardson thinking of to allow his ward to wander about the country in the small hours of the morning?

All this time he was watching her, and now she turned, she was coming in. He drew back a little further; he did not want her to see him, and in passing before the house, she might so easily look up. How, he asked himself, did she propose to get in? She did not appear to be in haste; she walked about the garden for a time, gathering a flower here and there, and then, after another look at the lake and the moors, came towards the house. She did not attempt to get in at the front door, she went round to the side, and he saw nothing more of her. He listened for the sound of a door opening or closing, for

footsteps on the stairs, but he heard nothing, and after he had listened and waited for some time, the chimes again rang out, the clock struck two, and he began to think it was time to go to bed. He did not, however, go to sleep. His brain was just as active as it had been before; but now, he thought of Maryla instead of Marion. He thought of her with repulsion and anger as an ill-regulated being, whose connection with respectable people was to be deplored. At last, he sought consolation in the supposition that she was mad—must be mad. So many things seemed to point to it; particularly this midnight rambling in the light of the full moon; it accounted, too, for her negligent manner to himself. The thought must have given him comfort, for in the midst of it he fell asleep.

CHAPTER II.

“And many shocks
Our order
Must every day endure.”

THE consequence of Mr. Knox's prolonged night-watch was that he came downstairs late for breakfast on the following morning. His tardy arrival seemed to have been the subject of some discussion, for as he opened the door he heard a voice he recognized as belonging to Miss Goldengay, saying,—

“He is not ours, we have nothing to do with him, we need not wait.”

On looking towards her, he saw that both she and Mr. Richardson had begun

breakfast, and from a slight cloud on Marion's forehead, which, however, disappeared as she caught sight of him, he concluded that the house had been divided on the question of his importance.

Greetings were exchanged, and then Maryla turned again to her guardian, saying,—

“It will be a magnificent day. I shall take my lunch out again, and not reappear until tea-time.”

Mr. Knox, with a vivid recollection of what had taken place the night before, turned to her, saying,—

“Are you never timid about walking alone on these lonely country roads, Miss Goldengay?”

“Why should I be timid? These roads are too unfrequented to be unsafe; you may walk fifteen or sixteen miles without meeting any one.”

“But is that quite wise? You might meet some very disagreeable person.”

“No; I tell you, I never meet any one.”

“Exactly. It cannot be safe for you.”

“If I never meet any one, I cannot possibly run any risk; my safety lies in their excessive loneliness.”

Mr. Richardson was looking at his ward and smiling, and Maryla's eyes were beginning to gleam, while her lips twitched. Mr. Knox saw it all, and it did not make him more yielding. When he was not yielding, he was rigid, and he now said obstinately,—

“Your defence is no defence at all. You *might* meet some one, and then it would be very unpleasant for you.”

“Possibilities are infinite. A great many things might happen, but they never do.”

“There are some possibilities against which we may guard ; it is foolish to run unnecessary risks.”

“I quite agree with you. I have heard that if it were known what risks were run in every railway journey, many people would never enter a train.”

Before he could reply, Marion began to speak.

“You exaggerate very much, Maryla. You do sometimes meet disagreeable people. You know you often bring home tales of tramps you have met.”

Mr. Knox smiled triumphantly, but Maryla went on calmly,—

“Tramps are not always disagreeable ; I like some tramps very much ; they are such good company, and have seen so many places. Sometimes they have a very keen sense of humour. I remember one who took an honest pride in his

calling; he called himself a cosmopolitan. There were few places where he said he had not spent at least a night; at some towns he had sojourned weeks or even months, always free of expense, his friends having taken upon themselves the cost of his lodging and maintenance."

She leaned back in her chair and laughed a low, soft laugh, full of amusement. Mr. Richardson also laughed heartily; Marion and Ethel looked a little disgusted, Mr. Knox preserved a grave silence.

"There was another," went on Miss Goldengay, "whom I met on the Northern Road. He had a wonderful amount of independence, and was walking from Rilford, where so many workpeople were out of employment just then. I asked him if he had found absolutely nothing to do at Rilford."

"Oh, yes," he said, 'a fellow offered

me work at twelve shillings a week, but I told him to keep his brass and let it grow a bit.' ”

Again she laughed, and this time the sound seemed familiar to Mr. Knox ; it was like the echo of laughter he had heard before, though where or when he could not tell. But his disgust could no longer be restrained, and he began to speak strongly.

“ Is it possible,” he said, “ that you venture to speak to such wretches, gaol-birds from your description, who prefer tramping along the high-road to earning an honest living ? I have no doubt the man had a wife and children.”

“ He had. He said he was tired of them, and was going to start afresh elsewhere.”

“ Your sympathies really run in strange channels. What about the wife left to

support her children as best she could? One feels almost tempted to say she would be justified in following his example."

"From what he said I gathered that she had taken the initiative."

Mr. Knox was not prepared with a retort, and Maryla, having finished her breakfast, rose and left the room.

Marion and Ethel had planned to take Mr. Knox out-of-doors, but as they left the dining-room, Miss Richardson was given a note which had just been brought by a servant. It was from Mr. Richardson's sister, and was to give notice that she intended to drive over to Beckbridge that morning, and spend the day with her nieces. The projected walk had therefore to be given up, and it was presently revealed to Stephen that Marion and Ethel were going to be busy, and that he

was expected to dispose of his own time.

He went into the garden and leaned over the wall, wondering what he should do with himself. He still felt angry with Maryla. He did not like her; it was clear that she had an unamiable and unwomanly character, and he feared that her presence would much decrease the pleasure of his visit to Stanedale. A girl who stayed out-of-doors till two o'clock in the morning, and avowed a preference for the society of tramps, was no fit companion for his future wife. Then he wondered who she was. When he had made the acquaintance of Mr. Richardson and his daughters, he had never heard any one of them mention Maryla Goldengay. How long had she been living at Beck-bridge, and where had she come from? There did not appear to be much affection

between her and the Misses Richardson, though her guardian seemed very fond of her.

As these thoughts passed through his mind he became aware of the presence of his obnoxious acquaintance. She must have left the house by some back or side entrance, and was now walking slowly along the steep road leading to the station, with a basket swinging from her hand, and he suddenly remembered what he had heard her say at breakfast, that she was going to take her lunch out-of-doors and stay till tea-time. He resolved to follow her and see where she was going : he might find an opportunity for saying what burned on his tongue.

The wall against which he was leaning was conveniently low ; he put his hand on to the top and vaulted into the road. He did not want to talk to Maryla just then,

only to see where she was going ; so he kept at a discreet distance behind her, hoping that she would not turn her head and see him.

It was not Maryla's custom to look behind her either when walking or doing anything else, so Mr. Knox was able to follow her in perfect safety. She went steadily on up the steep road, under a railway-arch, and then turning a little to the right, she began to mount an almost perpendicular hill, shaded by tall, over-arching trees, and with a brawling little stream hurrying down on one side. Mr. Knox, who was unaccustomed to hills, was struck with dismay ; he could imagine that if he slipped he would roll to the bottom of the hill as though down an alpine precipice. The trees, too, seemed to shut out the light and air ; he could have wished them away, but that just then he stumbled over a projecting root .

It then flashed across him that these same projecting roots with which the ground was covered might be used as rests against which to plant his feet when it became absolutely necessary to pause and take breath. He tried the plan and found it answer admirably.

By this time Maryla was some distance before him. She walked on lightly and easily, nor did she slacken speed even at the steepest part of the path.

At the top of the hill Mr. Knox stopped and looked back. He was lifted high above the village, even above the tops of the trees. He saw straight down into the beautiful Stanedale valley, and could trace the high-road winding between the heavy woods and lofty cliffs, to where the higher hills rose in the distance and shut out any further view. Looking to the right, he caught a glimpse of the lake. There were

no sounds except such as belonged purely to the woods and fields, the trilling of birds and the lowing of cows in the pastures, broken in upon from time to time by the complaining of the sheep upon the hills. Even the soul of Mr. Knox was stirred by what he saw, and the deep peace and stillness which rested on it all, and with an unconscious sigh he turned to follow Maryla.

At first he feared he had lost her ; but he saw her hat above a wall a long way in advance of where he stood. He hastened in that direction, and soon found himself in a rough lane with walls and high tangled hedges on each side, and Maryla walking leisurely before him. In a few minutes they reached the open moors at the foot of the Pike, which towered grandly up into the blue sky. Here the air was quite different from down in the valley ;

keen and fresh, redolent of heather and wide, open space. He drank it in, and even as he walked felt new strength enter into him.

He wondered where Maryla was leading him—they were out on the open moors, remote from all sound and sight of life, except that belonging to the moors themselves. Wilder and barer grew the country, not even a solitary farmhouse was in sight, and still Maryla walked on. They had passed one or two small tarns, brown and clear, and more than one tiny beck, born of a day's rain and likely to cease its flow as suddenly as it had begun ; but presently his ears were smitten by a roar and rush of waters, and turning a shoulder of the hill, they came upon a bold, brown mountain torrent, which came rushing over the moor, singing aloud for very joy at having broken loose from its prison among

the mountains. Here Maryla turned aside from the path, and after crossing a wide strip of marshy ground, where Mr. Knox had some difficulty in following her, she stopped. Then turning suddenly she saw him.

She did not speak at once and he profited by the short pause to scramble over the few rocks which lay between them and to place himself at her side. Then he said with rather an awkward smile,—

“I daresay you are wondering how I found my way here?”

“You followed me, I suppose.”

“Well, yes, I did. I was in the garden and saw you setting off.”

“How is it you are not with the Richardsons? Before you came into the breakfast-room they were planning some wonderful excursion for your enjoyment.”

Mr. Knox explained how the excursion

had come to nothing. Maryla smiled openly when she heard who was coming, and then said,—

“How is it that you did not overtake me sooner?”

He looked a little confused, but began an explanation which Maryla interrupted by saying,—

“I had a dog once, and sometimes when I went out and told him to stop at home he would follow me under the trees, or otherwise keep out of sight until he thought he had got too far to be sent back, and then he came out of hiding, evidently thinking he had done a very clever thing.”

“Well?” he said boldly, though he felt both his colour and temper rising.

“Oh, nothing. It is an anecdote, that is all.”

She went away to some little distance

as she spoke, and he stood still, feeling rather awkward and saying nothing. Then his eyes wandered to the place where they were. They stood on high ground, in a kind of hollow between the Pike and some tall, large crags which rose on the other side. The hollow itself was occupied by a small tarn, on the brink of which they stood. The water looked almost black, there was not a scrap of vegetation growing near it, not a single water-plant broke the dark smoothness of its surface. The ground all about was strewn with masses of rock, grey and weather-beaten as the crags that towered above. At the end of the tarn, the water broke away and was heard rushing under the stones, though there was nothing to be seen. In the middle of the tarn lay a large bare rock, and the motionless water lay black against its sides. The crags and hills

came sheer down to the brink of the little lake. Now, on a brilliant August morning, with the sun shining outside and a cloudless blue sky above, it looked as little eerie as it could, but Mr. Knox could not help wondering how it would appear at night, in the starlight, or with the moon silvering the black water and throwing strange shadows upon the ground and on the sides of the hills. This reminded him of the errand upon which he had come, and he moved to the place where Maryla was now seated on a fragment of rock, with her basket on the ground beside her.

“To be quite truthful,” he began, “I did follow you here with a purpose. I wanted to ask you a question.”

“Suppose you sit down—we could talk more comfortably in that way.”

He seated himself near her and then sat silent, suddenly realizing that he was

a perfect stranger to this girl, and had scarcely a right to remonstrate with her. There was something, too, in her strange black eyes which made it difficult for him to speak. He conquered the feeling, however, and said,—

“I wanted to ask where you went last night, when you left the drawing-room after tea.”

“How do you know I went anywhere?”

“I saw you come in just before two o’clock this morning, and I naturally felt some curiosity about what you had been doing out of doors at a time when most people are in bed and asleep.”

“If curiosity were as natural to me as you say it is to you, I might ask what you were doing up at an hour when, as you justly observe, most people are in bed.”

He had not expected this counter-accusation and was silent for a moment. She watched him with a gathering smile.

“Come,” she said at last, “how is it that you saw me?”

“I could not sleep,” he replied; “my head ached after my journey, and the view from my window was so beautiful, I could not leave it.”

“Why did you not make some sign that you were there? I do not mind being looked at, but I decidedly object to being peeped at from behind curtains.”

“But,” he said, leaving that point, “where had you been?”

“Where do you suppose?” leaning back in her rocky seat.

“I thought it possible that you had been to see some sick person and could not get home sooner.”

She smiled frankly as she answered,—

“I never go to visit sick people; I had been here.”

“Here!”

“Here at Hawkswater, where you and I are sitting now.”

“Impossible!”

“Not at all. You have just come yourself, and you see that, as roads go in this part of the world, the road up here is very good.”

She spoke lightly, and Mr. Knox was silent, trying to realize it.

She watched him with evident amusement, and began to laugh, as she said,—

“You don’t seem to take it in even yet, though there is nothing so very remarkable in it.”

“How could you do anything so imprudent?” he said at last. “Suppose you had met somebody?”

“This is the last place in the world

where I should be likely to meet any one at that hour."

"But what made you come?"

"I came for a walk, and stayed thinking."

"Do you often take such walks?"

"Yes, very often," speaking as if rather tired of the subject.

"I am surprised that Mr. Richardson allows it."

"Mr. Richardson?" she paused, smiling, and then went on—"Mr. Richardson allows me everything; he spoils me fearfully, he is ridiculously fond of me."

There was a pause. Maryla sat looking straight before her, the smile still hovering round her lips, a softness in her eyes which made them dangerously beautiful, Mr. Knox spoke first:—

"I daresay you will be surprised to hear that until yesterday I had no idea of your existence. When I knew Mr. Richardson

and his daughters at Sands they never mentioned you."

"I am not at all surprised; why should they mention me?"

"You live with them and form part of their life. It seems strange to me that I never heard your name."

"When there are certain disagreeables to be borne at home, people try to forget them when they go away."

"What do you mean? Why do you speak so mysteriously? I wish you would tell me how you came to be Mr. Richardson's ward."

"I have no objection to tell you. You would probably hear some time, and of course I shall show myself in a more advantageous light than they would."

CHAPTER III.

“List a brief tale.”

MISS GOLDENGAY sat in silence for a minute or two, and then began her story.

“My father and his brother were the only children of their parents, and my father was the younger son. I can tell you nothing about him, because I never knew him, he died a short time before I was born. He had very good prospects, but he ruined them all by marrying mama. He was sent into the Continent to forget a foolish attachment in England, and he straightway met mama, fell violently in love with her, and they were married at once. I must tell you that mama is the only person from whom I ever heard this

story. Mama was a Pole, very beautiful, and of course very poor. So was her husband very poor. His family, as you may believe, lost no time in quarrelling with him, and he never saw any of them after his marriage. When mama and I lived on the Continent, and I saw how beautiful and admired she was, and found how happily we lived on our little bit of money, I never could understand why his people quarrelled with him. Since I came to England, four years ago, I have understood very well. When they had been married a few months, papa died, and mama was left a widow with very little money."

She paused for a moment and then continued:—

"I do not know whether I could make you understand what kind of woman mama was. When I was a child she was a great mystery to me, but as I grew up I

found her very interesting. I do not think there are many women like her, which, perhaps, is less to be regretted than might appear at first sight. What is the matter?" she broke off abruptly to ask.

"I did not speak."

"Not with your tongue; but your face is more expressive than you suppose. I have said something of which you disapprove."

"Pray go on with your story."

"Not until you have told me what you were thinking; though, after all, I can guess."

"Indeed," was his rather sceptical reply.

"You were thinking I was wrong to speak of mama in that way?"

"I was thinking so. I dislike to hear parents spoken of disrespectfully."

She laughed a little, and he said again,—

“Please go on with your story.”

“Do not interrupt me again, or I shall never get to the end.”

“I did not interrupt you, I said nothing; it was you who attacked me. What was your mother like?”

“She was very beautiful,—not in my way, but dark and very small, and merciless in her judgment of women without beauty. She had very winning manners, and wherever we went she was surrounded by a crowd of men, all making love to her, and keeping her in a good humour. Most women in that position would not have cared to have a daughter always with them who grew apace, and promised to be as beautiful as themselves. She was very unlike other women; she looked much younger than she was, and she liked to astonish people by telling them how many

years had gone by since her wedding-day, and to produce a daughter taller than herself. She was not afraid of losing her influence over men; if she had lived to be a little black-eyed, white-haired old lady of a hundred, I believe she would have had as many admirers as when she was twenty."

"When is Mr. Richardson coming in?" asked her companion.

"Now, at this moment," she replied. "We were in Dresden, and one of mama's friends brought Mr. Richardson to our rooms. It was after the death of his wife, and he was on his way home after having wandered all over the world. He admired mama, though I think he always laughed at her a little, but he and I soon became great friends. We spent all our time together; he was kinder to me than I can say. I had seen a great many English gentlemen—he was the first who made me

want to come to England and live amongst them."

Mr. Knox was astonished at the change in her; her voice thrilled him: with the wonderful softness in her face and eyes she looked exquisite.

"He was much distressed at the state into which my morals and education had fallen, and he proposed to mama that I should come here and live with him and his daughters, as his youngest daughter.

"Did she consent?"

"She consented. He brought me with him four years ago, and I have lived here since."

"And your mother?"

"She died the following year."

"Did she leave you in his charge?"

"She left me in nobody's charge. She died very suddenly, without a moment's warning."

“Then it was by your own arrangement you stayed here, or did Mr. Richardson propose it? I almost wonder your relations did not claim you.”

A singular change passed over Maryla's face. For a moment Mr. Knox thought she was going to be very angry; then she smiled and said,—

“I thought I told you there had been a quarrel; I do not know that they were aware of my existence.”

“I once met a Sir Edward Goldengay; is he any relation to you?”

“He is my uncle, my father's elder brother.”

“I think you are foolish not to make up the quarrel. Mr. Richardson is an old man; what will you do when he dies, and you have no relatives to go to?”

Her eyes gleamed with sudden anger, and her face went very white.

“How dare you talk of his death!” she said; “and what is it to you if I have not a friend in the world?”

“Oh, nothing,” he replied rather stiffly, “I only thought I would give you a little advice. I confess I see nothing in what I said to warrant such a tone or such words.”

She laughed a little unsteadily. “Do not say any more such things. I beg of you.”

There was a silence which lasted some little time, and which Maryla broke by saying,—

“I was just sixteen then. Have you no curiosity about Marion’s and Ethel’s feelings when I came?”

Something in her tone caused him to answer guardedly,—

“I do not quite understand.”

“Do you suppose they liked my coming?”

“Why should they not? You speak as if they were naturally unfriendly towards you. I am sure both Miss Richardson and her sister are above that kind of thing.”

“No doubt. I have no hesitation in saying that all they did was right, and that the sense of outrage they experienced was altogether justifiable. It might have been better if we would have accepted the situation in the same spirit, but they cried and I laughed, and the more they cried, the more I laughed, and made myself every day more hateful to them.”

“You were wrong,” interrupted Mr. Knox; “you had no right to laugh. You might have made friends of them from the beginning; it is evidently your own fault if you are not on good terms now.”

“I have no doubt of it: did I not say they had reason on their side all through?”

“Miss Richardson could not be wilfully unkind to any one, it would be contrary to her nature, which I am convinced is all sweetness. Her mind is too delicate to allow her to inflict suffering upon any one.”

“I quite agree with you,” replied Maryla, looking not at him, but straight before her to the high ridge of moor on the other side of the lake. “She is, I am sure, of very uncommon clay, and as such must have careful handling. We all know that the rarest things are often the most brittle, and will not stand wear and tear like coarser vessels.

“I do not understand you ; you speak in riddles.”

“Perhaps you will learn by experience.”

Her words were followed by a somewhat lengthy silence, which Mr. Knox at last broke by asking,—

“What have you been doing all this time?”

“I?” rousing herself; “very much what I am doing now, spending my time out of doors without any definite employment. Without any wish to represent myself as less obnoxious than I must of necessity have been, I can’t think I was very much in the way. This kind of country was quite new to me, and I at once began to explore it. In the parts of Germany where I had lived there are no hills like these, no woods and lakes and lanes. I had spent my childhood near Posen, and you must have been in that country before you can picture its utter flatness. In the flattest parts of England, Mr. Richardson says, you are within sight, or a day’s walk of the hills, but there you may travel for days, and the country is as flat as when you set out. The woods are different, they are

forests, and the lakes are so vast and lonely, so unlike these."

"Not a country which you would be very sorry to leave, I should think?"

"It was my own country; remember I am half a Pole."

The intelligence gave him a little shock; he had somehow failed to grasp that the girl seated at his side was the daughter of a penniless Polish countess and a disinherited younger son.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked; "are you going to live here always?"

Her face changed, her figure seemed to expand, her eyes looked larger, and her lips parted, as though drawing in a wider, fuller life, her delicate nostrils quivered a little. She looked like a caged eagle, biding its time till the door of its prison should be opened.

"At present," she replied, "Mr.

Richardson claims me ; I owe everything to him and he needs me, but later—”

“What later ?” looking at her rather curiously.

“I shall go and live in a town.”

He laughed at this unexpected answer, and, as though she did not wish to pursue the subject, she said,—

“Now tell me something about yourself ? Who are you, where do you live, and what do you do ?”

“My story is more commonplace than yours. The only resemblance between us is that we are both without either parents or brothers and sisters. I live in London. I was born there, and as I have a sufficient fortune I do nothing in particular. Before I came here I was negotiating with Sir William Hunter about a secretaryship which he had offered me ; I do not know if it will come to anything.”

“Why not?”

“He is going to India, and I do not know if I should care to go. Besides, the circumstances are different now.”

“If you marry Marion, you will have to give up that idea,” thought Maryla, but aloud she said, while she lifted up her little basket and opened it,—

“I am going to eat my lunch. I can’t offer you much, because there was only enough put up for me. You can choose between short commons here, and peace and plenty at Beckbridge.”

“He felt that she might have made it more difficult for him to say, “I will stay here,” and he took that for a sign that she wanted him to stay, so he answered lazily,—

“Thank you, I do not want anything; but if you can spare me a biscuit, I will eat that to keep you company.”

As they lunched they talked of many things. Stephen had left his seat, and stretched himself upon the ground near Maryla, and she sat and looked at him. Her eyes rested calmly and critically upon his tall, strong figure, his dark, colourless face, with features regular enough for beauty, and which yet repelled her strangely. She looked at him for some time and then thought,—

“You look as cold as ice, but, if I am not very much mistaken, you can get into tremendous rages, when you will do any mad thing, and you are as jealous as Othello. It is well for Marion that she has no other admirers.”

CHAPTER IV.

"The argument of your praise, balm of your age."

"Why is your speech so faint? Are you not well?"

"I have a pain upon my forehead here."

It was on the day following his long talk with Maryla that Stephen found himself walking with Mr. Richardson towards the lake in the cool of the evening. Their way lay along two wide grass-grown lanes bordered by tall, ragged hedges full of honeysuckle and a few late-blooming wild roses. In the fields on either side the hay was lying in fragrant heaps, for the season had been a late one, and though it was the beginning of August, cautious farmers had not yet cleared their fields. At the end

of the first lane, the two men turned to the left, and crossed a stone bridge overgrown with ivy and spanning the clear, shallow beck, flowing on its way to empty itself into the lake. It was an exquisite evening after an oppressively hot day, and the sight of the wide smooth, sheet of water was more grateful even than usual.

It was the first time Stephen had been alone with his host, and he was conscious of a feeling of constraint. He had never felt in sympathy with Mr. Richardson, he could not understand him. He seemed to have so little in common with his charming daughters, and to be in perfect harmony with that strange creature Miss Goldengay. He walked in silence, therefore, waiting for his companion to speak first. His words, when they came, were scarcely comprehensible.

“Wonderful, wonderful,” he said; and again, “most wonderful, wonderful.”

“Of what are you speaking?” asked Stephen in surprise.

“I was thinking aloud, and the subject of my thoughts was my ward, Maryla.”

“How is she wonderful?” asked Stephen.

In many ways; the particular one of which I was thinking was her power of description.”

“How do you mean?”

“She told me last night that she had been explaining to you in the morning how she came to live with me.”

“Yes.”

“Did she tell you anything about her future prospects?”

“Not anything.”

“Nothing about her literary aspirations?”

“Not a word. Has she such aspirations?”

“What a strange creature she is! I expect that one day she will be a great writer.”

“Ah! that is interesting. What makes you think so?”

“The extraordinary power of writing which she has even now.”

“Is that really so? Has she already written anything?”

“She has written a great deal; sketches of the country and people round about here. You were expressing surprise yesterday at breakfast that she should care to talk to the tramps and other people whom she occasionally meets in her rambles. If you saw the masterly studies she makes of these chance meetings you would be amazed.”

“Really, if she has such great talents,

is it not a pity she does not employ them in her own rank of life ? ”

“ She is a student, and a very promising one, of human nature,” smiling rather whimsically as he spoke. “ It is marvellous to find such power in a girl of her age.”

“ Has she published anything yet ? ”

“ Her last paper was so good, I insisted upon sending it to that new magazine, *Men and Manners* ; it was accepted, and she got paid for it, which after all is the great test.”

“ Is it known that she writes ? ”

“ It is a profound secret between herself and me. I have just betrayed it, but you must let it go no further.”

“ What line will she take up ? ”

“ Fiction ; she is equally strong in dialogue.”

Mr. Knox was silent, digesting this intelligence ; then he said,—

“ Her experience has been singularly varied for so young a girl.”

“ Yes, you are right ; she led a strange life before she came here. How well I remember the first time I saw her ! It was the first time I went to the Countess’s rooms, and there were a great many other people there, all men. The Countess was very beautiful, a tiny, fairy-like creature, and in the course of the evening a dispute arose between her and one of her guests, concerning some trinket of which he had got possession, and which he would not give up. At last I remember he put it on the top of a cabinet, of no great height, but quite beyond her reach. Another guest seeing her impatience, rose to get it for her, and at the same time made some jesting remark about her want of height. I had not then got accustomed to the tone which prevailed in the Countess’s rooms, and

I was wondering a little at the whole affair, when I heard a girl's voice, saying,—

“ ‘ What would be the use of your being tall, Count, if mama were tall too ? ’ ”

“ I turned and saw Maryla standing in the doorway. She had been on the river, and wore a boating-dress of white serge, and a sailor-hat, which for some reason, which she never would tell me, she always called a Moses. We made friends at once, and when I found how bad a life she was leading for a girl of her age and character, I had some serious talk with her mother, and persuaded her to let Maryla come home with me. She was really very fond of her daughter, and willing to do the best for her that lay in her power.”

“ Her coming must have made a great change to your daughters.”

“ I am sorry to have to say that, on

that occasion, my daughters disappointed me very much."

"She has prejudiced him against his own children," thought Mr. Knox indignantly. "She tells me," he went on, "that she has relations living in England."

"Yes, Sir Edward Goldengay, of Courtfield, is her uncle. She has never expressed any wish to make their acquaintance, and so I have never pressed the matter, though I once proposed it."

By this time they had turned, and were walking back to the house. As they went up the garden, Ethel came out to meet them, saying,—

"Here you are at last, papa. Mr. Henn has been waiting nearly half an hour to see you."

Mr. Henn was the vicar of Stanedale, rather a pompous little man, and a source of great amusement to Miss Goldengay."

Mr. Richardson went into the house, exchanged greetings with his guest, and then looked round the room, saying,—

“Where is Maryla?”

“I think she is in the study,” answered Ethel.

“Go and tell her Mr. Henn is here; she will like to see him.”

The girls could not understand why their father always sent for Maryla when Mr. Henn called; for he bore her no affection. This evening he went so far as openly to protest,—

“Do not disturb Miss Goldengay at her studies, I beg. I am very glad to hear she has some definite employment; it would be a great pity to interrupt her.”

“She is not studying,” said Mr. Richardson; “she is only doing a little writing for me. Go, Ethel,” again turning to his daughter.

Maryla came at once; she came in with a smile and shining eyes. She knew the vicar held her in honest, upright abhorrence, and it was a source of pure pleasure to her to inflict her presence upon him. Marion knew all this, and she was resolved that this evening Maryla should not have her way, so she kept the conversation in her own hands.

“How do you like Mr. Vernon?” she asked, and then turned to Stephen with an explanation: “Mr. Vernon is our new curate, it is his first curacy, and Mr. Henn has had to teach him a great deal.”

“Vernon?” echoed the vicar, stroking his chin, “I really don’t know what we are to do with him; a most painful thing happened this morning at Lake Foot. Perhaps you have heard of it.”

No one had heard, and all were eager to know to what he referred.

“It was the christening of Mrs. Coward’s first baby, and as it was a private ceremony at the house, I thought it rather a good opportunity for Vernon to have his first christening. I went over the service most carefully with him, and told him not to be nervous, it was a very simple affair. However, the baby was restless, and I suppose he got flurried; at any rate, he let the child fall, and it was killed.”

The silence which followed his words was broken by peals of laughter from Maryla. She laughed as though she were never going to stop; laughter of the gods, without a false note in it, clear and melodious and soft, as delicious as the song of a bird or the rippling of the beck outside. Marion flushed with annoyance, and her voice rang sharply as she said,—

“Maryla, how can you laugh? I wonder

you are not ashamed. I never heard anything so sad ; the dear little baby, and poor Mrs. Coward—I am very, very sorry for her.”

Ethel joined in the chorus, and Maryla continued to laugh. She was sitting on the couch and she leaned her head against the cushions and shook with laughter. Mr. Richardson had prudently placed himself in a part of the room where his eyes could not meet hers. Mr. Henn looked at her severely, and said,—

“I am both shocked and grieved at your behaviour, Miss Goldengay.”

“I wish you would go out of the room,” said Marion in tones of unmistakable anger.

“It is painful to us all to hear you. I am utterly at a loss to imagine why you laugh. I am sure when one pictures the scene to oneself—”

“That is just what I am doing,” said

Maryla. "When I picture the scene—
What *is* the matter, Mr. Knox?"

Every one turned to look at Mr. Knox, who stood with colourless cheeks, slightly parted lips, and distended eyes fixed upon Maryla.

"If you must stare in that way," she went on, as he said nothing, "why not choose some one else to stare at?"

He roused himself as she finished speaking, and made an effort to regain his usual manner, but the attempt was such a failure that Marion said with some anxiety,—

"I am afraid you do not feel well, Mr. Knox."

"No," said Stephen, still with an effort; "I do not feel well,—a sudden pain at my head. I am subject to it; it will pass off; please think no more about it."

He spoke almost as if he were dreaming,

and when he had finished, he raised his hand, not to his head, but to his heart.

“You must have something,” said Marion. “What do you generally take?”

“Nothing, nothing, thank you. It will pass off; I generally leave it alone.”

“That cannot be wise. If you neglect it now, it may come on again in the night, when you will be more helpless.”

He was obliged to submit. Mr. Henn took a hurried departure, and was accompanied to the door by Mr. Richardson and Maryla, neither of whom returned to the drawing-room.

Mr. Knox went to his room early, and was entreated to ring for his breakfast in the morning, if he did not feel perfectly restored.

He was glad to be alone, glad to have drawn the bolt between himself and in-

terruption, glad to be able to look as he felt. He crossed the room and leaned out of the window, looking at the lake as it lay in the moonlight. The beck rushed by, filling the air with its murmur, and somewhere in the distance he heard a dog barking. There were no other sounds to break the train of his thoughts, and he found no difficulty in fixing them upon that one moment in his life which he just then found full of interest. He went back three years, to the summer in which, following the advice of his medical man, he had taken a short walking-tour. He remembered reaching a little village—a slight effort of memory brought back the name to him—Haygarth. He remembered that he strolled into the church, went up into the organ-loft, and fell asleep. He had partially wakened from his sleep to the consciousness that a marriage was

going on beneath him; he had been fully roused a few minutes later by a peal of laughter coming from the churchyard. He had thought at the time that he had never before heard such laughter, and that if he ever heard it again, he would be able to identify the bride of that summer morning. Three years had gone by since that morning, and he had completely forgotten the incident; to-night he had heard it again.

No, he told himself, it was impossible. He rose from the window-ledge and began to pace up and down the room. As certainly as he told himself that the laughter he had heard this evening, and that he had heard in Haygarth Church were not the same, so certainly did he know that they were. There could not be two such sounds—they were one and the same.

Then was he to suppose that Maryla Goldengay was married? It seemed exceedingly probable. She had spoken of her long walks, and Haygarth was, he knew, only ten miles from Stanedale. It would explain, too, her midnight ramble. No doubt she had been to pay a stolen visit to her husband; she had said she took such walks often, and then had changed the subject as though unwilling to pursue it any further. There was, too, a careless self-possession in her manner, which Miss Richardson, in spite of her grave dignity, did not always show. He had observed it from the beginning, and after hearing her story, had attributed it to the way in which her earlier life had been spent; now it appeared in its proper light as the manner natural to a married woman.

So far everything seemed in favour of her marriage, yet a little reflection showed

him that he had nothing but the vaguest supposition to go upon. Because he felt absolutely certain that Miss Goldengay had been the person whose laughter had made such an impression upon him, why should he suppose that she had been married? She might very easily have been in Haygarth Churchyard when the newly-married couple left the church. If she saw anything in their manner or appearance to excite her amusement, he felt sure that no consideration would prevent her giving free vent to it. That was very much the more probable solution of the mystery. And after all, what did it matter to him if she should prove to be married? He did not like her, she was deficient in all the qualities which he most admired in a woman; if she had done such a thing it did not matter to him; except as it concerned Marion—there it

touched him and became a matter in which he had a right to judge and to act. He wondered if Mr. Richardson knew who the husband was, and why his wife did not live with him. Then he told himself he was a fool to trouble his head about the matter, and went to bed.

When he awoke the next morning he found that many of his suspicions had vanished, and when he went downstairs and saw Maryla, heard her voice, felt the touch of her hand, and watched her free, unfettered movements, he began to feel that it was absurd to suspect such a girl of such a deed. She was candour and transparency itself : was it likely that a girl who would tell her whole story without reserve to a man whom four-and-twenty hours earlier she had never seen, could keep such a secret as a hidden marriage?

After breakfast he went out, with Marion

and Ethel. It was not a picnic,—the Richardsons did not care for picnics, unless a large party packed themselves into two or three carriages, and, supported by a proper number of hampers of good things, drove to a place where there was something to see, ruins, or a queer old church, or a farmhouse with a panelled room. At the same time they looked upon a walk without an object as a meaningless waste of precious hours. So to-day they had arranged to walk to a certain farm, drink a glass of milk, carry home a basket of eggs, and get back in time for their early dinner. Mr. Richardson had gone away for the day on business, and Maryla had roamed off alone in quite another direction, with her little luncheon-basket in her hand.

Mr. Knox after a little fencing led the conversation to Miss Goldengay, and proceeded to put some leading questions about

her. He was astonished at the acrimonious tone in which he was answered, and when he contrasted it with the half-cynical, half-humorous way in which Maryla had spoken of her guardian's daughters, he felt for the first time a stirring at his heart in favour of Maryla. Later in the day, when he was alone in the sunny, fragrant garden, he thought of it again, and once more vague, shadowy doubts began to creep into his mind. He thought he was beginning to understand the girl's nature, and as he thought of what he had heard about her, the idea of this marriage became more and more likely. A little reflection showed him that he must have been at Haygarth very shortly after the death of Maryla's mother. Ethel had said how careless and reckless she was, unmindful of consequences, and concerned only with the present hour. What might not a girl like

that do in a moment of despondency, perhaps after a skirmish with these girls? He grew more and more uncomfortable, half-blaming, half-excusing her, until, hearing the gate open and shut, he looked up and saw her coming towards him.

“Where are the girls?” she asked, pausing when she was near him.

He frowned. Of course he was going to ask Marion to marry him, but there was no need to suppose that they must be always together, as Miss Goldengay seemed to think.

“They have gone to a meeting at the Rectory,” he replied.

“To deliberate upon what must be done with Mr. Vernon, no doubt; there is sure to be a committee meeting about it. If I see him I shall advise him to flee the country; his life will not be worth a moment’s purchase if he meets Mrs. Coward.”

He preserved a displeased silence, and his sympathy again swung round to the side of the other girls. All Miss Goldengay's conversation was light and flippant, utterly wanting in ballast and principle. He began to think her marriage might have been the result of causes very different from those he had imagined. Out of pure recklessness and lightness of heart, she might have got married and come home again; perhaps her husband had sent her home. The more he thought, the more he disliked her whole manner and conversation; he regretted that so ugly and ill-conditioned a mind should be lodged in so beautiful a body. He felt his severity relax when he thought how very beautiful she was, and then he was disgusted at his own weakness, and felt quite glad when Marion and Ethel returned. Yet he felt a little impatient, and glad Maryla was not present,

when they told him that "Mr. Vernon's misfortune" had been discussed, and it had been arranged that for the present, at any rate, he should be entrusted with no more christenings.

CHAPTER V.

“ I’ll have some proof.”

A WEEK passed before Mr. Knox could make up his mind to take any steps towards investigating the mystery which seemed to surround Maryla, and during that week he changed his opinion about this marriage every day. There were times when he felt almost ashamed of his suspicions, and as though to suppose such a creature as Miss Goldengay at that moment appeared to be, could be guilty of getting secretly married, was like crediting Minerva with a nineteenth-century flirtation. Again, she appeared in a light which made him say within himself that

she was capable of anything, and that a secret marriage in a remote country church was but a small way of gauging her powers. If she really were married, he believed that she would do anything to regain her liberty. Liberty seemed as the breath of life to her : to spend her time on the boundless moors, her view uninterrupted by walls and hedges, gloveless and hatless, a small supply of the simplest food in her basket, seemed to constitute her idea of happiness. She needed neither books nor work to pass the time—she was content if she might spend long hours sitting or lying upon the heather, watching the great white clouds float through the sky, melt away, form again out of nothing, and throw fantastic shadows on the hills. She said that when she had looked for a little time at the clouds, the difficulties in believing that the world was created out

of nothing, completely vanished. It was only in the house that she was restless and wanted "something to do." As soon as she felt a roof over her head, and four walls enclose her, she changed: Mr. Knox, watching her, thought that in the restricted atmosphere of a house, her resplendent beauty became almost imperceptibly paler.

During this week, Stephen became more intimate with Miss Goldengay. He thought she was revealing her nature to him and he felt mingled pleasure and pain, and a growing desire to know the truth about her. He was not very happy. He was oppressed with a vague uneasiness which often made him sigh and knit his brows, and feel disinclined to enjoy the society of Marion and Maryla at the same time. He was angry with himself for having made the discovery that sometimes

Marion's dignity looked stiff beside Maryla's careless ease. At last he made up his mind to go to Haygarth and find out whether he had been worrying himself needlessly, or whether Miss Goldengay had been guilty of all he feared and suspected. At last, after much private consultation of the Ordnance map, and a little mental calculation, his plan was ripe for execution, and he took the first opportunity of carrying it out.

"Is there not a place near here called Brigg?" he asked Marion one morning at breakfast.

"It is not exactly near here; it is about thirty miles away."

"Oh," he said dubiously, "I thought it was nearer." Then after a moment, spent apparently in consideration, he went on,—

"How do you get there? By train?"

“ Yes ; I think there are trains, papa,” raising her voice a little ; “ there are trains to Brigg, are there not ? ”

Mr. Richardson had been carrying on a low-voiced conversation with Maryla. At his daughter’s question, he looked up rather absently, saying,—

“ Eh, my dear ? What did you say ? ”

But Maryla’s quick ears had caught the subject of conversation, and she asked,—

“ What about Brigg ? Who wants to go to Brigg ? ”

Mr. Knox fancied that her voice already held a tone of suspicion, and he answered,—

“ I merely asked how far it is from here.”

“ Do you want to go there ? ”

“ I have a note from a friend of mine,” tapping the table with a letter which he had received that morning, “ and he asks

me to make him a sketch of an old bridge at Brigg. But he seems under the impression that the place is close to here."

"With a little trouble you can go by train," said Maryla; "but it will need a little contrivance to arrange it, because the trains to Brigg run for their own convenience, not that of the public. You can't go and come back in one day."

"I am sorry. If it had been within a walk now—"

"There is a comfortable inn there," said Mr. Richardson. "You might go one day and come back the next."

"If you will allow me," turning to Marion.

It was found on investigation that there was a train to Brigg in about two hours, and by it Mr. Knox took his departure. He felt some excitement as

he sat in the slowly-progressing market train. He had resolved to carry out the programme he had sketched, so that he could not go to Haygarth until the following day.

It was still early when he reached Haygarth. The church was a small building which might easily have been overlooked by any one not acquainted with the village. His heart beat fast as he walked along the road and recognized things which had caught his attention three years before.

He inquired for the clerk's house, and was directed to the smithy. He explained what he wanted, and, after overcoming some scruples on the part of the blacksmith, was sent in the company of his daughter to the church.

Mr. Knox prided himself upon never forgetting a face he had once seen, and he felt certain that the man who had just

received him was not the man who had let him out of the church in which he had been locked up. To make quite certain, he asked the young woman walking at his side,—

“How long has your father been clerk here?”

“About two years, ever sin’ the old man died.”

“One witness of the marriage removed by death,” he thought. “And the clergyman,” he went on, “is he dead too?”

“Aye,” replied his guide indifferently, “he is dead too.”

They had now reached the church; she fitted the key into the lock, pushed open the door, and stood aside for Mr. Knox to go in.

He stood still and looked round before going into the vestry. How well he remembered it, the bare whitewashed walls,

the flat papered ceiling, and windows of greenish glass, the railed-off space which served as a chancel, the altar covered with an old and shabby altar-cloth, and bare of all ornaments! Was it possible, he thought, as he stood and looked, that here Maryla Goldengay had uttered her marriage vows, and apparently disregarded them ever since! He was roused by the voice of his companion telling him that she had got out the registers; would he please to come and look.

He had merely told the girl that the marriage he wanted to find had taken place in June or July, three years earlier. He himself knew the month, and even after considerable calculation, the very day of the ceremony, and he quickly turned over the pages of the book with a curious feeling of mingled hope and fear that the entry he sought might not be there.

But it was. At the top of a page there was the customary entry, and it was signed "Maryla Goldengay." He turned quite cold at the sight; there was a singing in his ears, and a strange, confused feeling in his head. He leaned against the roughly whitewashed window-sill, upon which the book lay open before him, and looked out of the window without seeing anything. For a few minutes he was scarcely conscious of where he was.

After a time he roused himself, and took a slip of paper from his pocket-book. A few days before, he had, with this expedition in view, engaged Maryla in a contest of penmanship, and so possessed himself of her signature. He now took it out, and compared it with the writing in the book. They were the same. In spite of one or two little differences of detail, there could not be a shadow of a doubt

that the same hand had written both names, and the hand which had written the name in the book had never trembled.

Then for the first time he looked at the name of the bridegroom—Maurice Wingfield. It was unknown to him; he had never seen or heard it before, and he stood mechanically repeating the two names, “Maryla Goldengay, Maurice Wingfield.”

He was roused by a movement on the part of his guide, who stood at a little distance.

“Have you found what you wanted, sir?” she asked as he rose from his leaning attitude against the window-ledge.

“Yes, I thank you,” he replied, shutting the book as he spoke; and she was astonished at the tone in which he spoke, and still more at the whiteness of his face.

He lingered in the vestry as she put the

registers away, and said, almost as if he did not know what he was saying,—

“This seems a very quiet place; I suppose you do not see many strangers?”

“Eh, no,” was her answer; “nobody hardly ever comes here. You see there’s no railway, and the roads are bad, and it’s a far cry to Brigg, except for those that have to come and go.”

“But there’s Stanedale; do you never have people over from Stanedale?”

She endeavoured to express her astonishment by means of parted lips and widely-distended eyes.

“Stanedale! sir,” she repeated. “Why Stanedale is a matter of ten miles from here, and no road at all, as you may call a road; you have to pick your way over the hills and through many a bog. Nay!” with a short laugh, “I ne’er heard tell of any Stanedale folk coming here.”

“Have you lived here long?” was his next question.

“Only since father was made clerk. Before then we lived at Brigg.”

After a few more questions he left the church, and a little later the village, being resolved rather to walk back to Brigg, and take the train thence to Stanedale, than to risk himself upon such a road as the woman had described. If Maryla had walked from Stanedale she must have been eager to be married.

He had thought, that when once he knew the truth about this marriage his mind would be at rest, and he would know how to act. It was not so at all. As he travelled back to Stanedale, he found that he was painfully undecided. Did Mr. Richardson know, or did he not? Ought he to tell or to keep silence? He could not decide, and when he reached Stanedale,

he had arrived at no further conclusion than that he would have an explanation with Maryla the very next day.

It was still early in the afternoon when he got back, but he did not see Maryla until tea-time, when she came into the room with a careless, happy expression, which to Stephen seemed to denote practised hypocrisy. Full of his new discovery, her indifference irritated him beyond endurance, and though, when he first came in, he had felt that the most distant allusion to his morning's occupation would have covered him with confusion, the sight of Miss Goldengay's calm unconsciousness that she was treading on the edge of a precipice, nerved him to mention the subject himself.

It was very easy to lead up to it. He was questioned about his expedition, and it came in quite naturally to say,—

“ I found I had more time on my hands than I wanted, so this morning I walked over to Haygarth. What an old-world little place it is, have you ever been there ? ”

He included everybody in his question. Mr. Richardson was not attending, and gave no answer, Marion and Ethel said no, they had never been, they did not think there was any road, or anything to justify so great an effort when you reached the village. Maryla answered calmly,—

“ Yes, I have been there, it is a very curious place.”

“ When have you been ? ” asked Ethel, in surprise.

“ I went several times when I first came to live here. It must be three years since I was there last.”

“ How did you get there ? ”

“ I walked over the hills.”

“Did you ever go into the church?” asked Stephen.

“Oh, yes,” she replied smiling, and the smile became a laugh.

“Why do you laugh?” he asked suspiciously.

“I was laughing at the recollection of an absurd incident, which happened to me there.”

She could be speaking only of her marriage, and she called it “an absurd incident,” and laughed as she spoke. Stephen felt his blood begin to boil.

“It is seldom, I should think, that churches are the scenes of absurd incidents,” he said stiffly; and Mr. Richardson said,—

“Tell us about it.”

“Nay,” she replied, helping herself to some plums as she spoke, “you might not think it absurd, and nothing is more chill-

ing than to tell a tale at which nobody laughs."

"I should imagine," said Stephen, "that you are often in the position of finding amusement in what appears perfectly serious to other people."

"I am so happily constituted," was her reply.

Mr. Richardson began to laugh, he openly encouraged her, and Mr. Knox was too much disgusted to say any more. He began to find conversation with Miss Goldengay a little difficult, she turned everything into a jest; it was his habit to take the most palpable jest in perfect seriousness. He mentally resolved that on the morrow he would not spare her. But she went on talking about Haygarth and asked,—

"How did you get home?"

"I came from Brigg. The woman who

showed me the church said there was no proper road from Haygarth here."

"It is bad certainly, but not impassable. I walked from here."

"And how did you get back?" unable to repress all signs of his curiosity.

She laughed again, saying,—

"I thought I never should get back, but I walked the way I went."

"I thought I never should get back," that of course referred to her marriage; he wondered at her audacity in talking about it, and was just going to reply, when he was interrupted by a question from Marion. She thought Stephen and Maryla had talked together quite long enough; besides, their conversation was interesting to nobody. She did not see how they themselves could be interested in such pointless questions and answers.

All the rest of the evening Stephen felt

irritable and unsettled. The whole family had assembled in the drawing-room. Mr. Richardson had fallen asleep over the newspaper; Marion and Ethel were busy with their fancy work, Maryla was at the piano, playing softly Polish songs and dances, German "*Volkslieder*," and old waltzes which she remembered from the day when she had lived in Vienna and Dresden. Marion presently proposed that Mr. Knox should read to them, and he got a volume of essays, and began at once, glad of something which should replace in his mind that endless repetition of "Maryla Goldengay, Maurice Wingfield."

CHAPTER VI.

“Are you fast married?”

THE next morning Stephen felt excited and nervous. He had a great undertaking to carry out, and he wished to do it worthily. He had spent a great deal of time, in the night before going to sleep, and this morning after waking unusually early, in reviewing the situation and arranging how to open the attack. He felt that it was impossible to count upon Maryla, he could not tell how she would behave. She might take the news that her secret had been discovered with composure, or he might find that her light humour was only a mask to hide violent

passions. Would she stand revealed as a deceiver, or as deceived? perhaps she carried an aching heart under her gay manner. He did not know what would happen; he was decided on only one point, that the explanation should not be delayed.

Full of his plan, he turned to Maryla, during breakfast, to ask,—

“Are you going to spend the day out of doors, Miss Goldengay?”

Maryla replied that such was her intention.

“In that case,” he went on rather hastily, “may I go with you to wherever you are going?”

He knew that he was making an unprecedented request, and his manner as he spoke was cold and constrained, which was his way of showing embarrassment.

There was a pause as he spoke; every

one was astonished. Marion drew herself up, and her mouth looked all at once as if it were of iron; Ethel raised her eyebrows and drew down the corners of her lips; even Mr. Richardson looked up for a moment, and Maryla's face took an odd, whimsical look which it wore at times.

"You may come if you wish to," she said at last, "but I am going a very long way, and on a very bad road. I know you are susceptible to bad roads."

"Where are you going?" asked Mr. Richardson.

"To Ravensghyll Force."

"That is almost too far, it is nine miles each way."

"I shall do it very well; but you," turning to Mr. Knox, "will be half dead when we get back."

"Nevertheless, I shall, with your permission, venture," he replied; for it will

be easily understood that, in proportion as she showed unwillingness for his society, he became more resolute to accompany her.

“Just as you please,” she said indifferently, when he persisted; “of course, you can turn back when you feel inclined.”

When breakfast was over, Marion and her sister went into the drawing-room, and Marion stood looking out of the window, and saying nothing. Ethel moved about the room, busy in arranging some flowers she had gathered before breakfast, but neither did she say anything.

Before either had spoken, they were joined by Mr. Knox. He glanced from one to the other of the two girls, but they were both silent; only Marion’s figure seemed to grow taller and straighter. To break a rather awkward silence, he said,—

“How the weather keeps up! It is a magnificent day for spending on the hills.”

“Yes,” replied Ethel, who was in every way quicker and more impulsive than her sister, “we had thought of going into those woods I was telling you about the other day; but now, of course, we must stay at home.”

“You are very good to plan so many pleasures for me, but we can go another time; I hope we shall have more such days as this.”

“It does not signify,” said Marion, turning her face, from which every vestige of feeling had vanished, towards them. “Ethel was foolish to mention the plan at all. I hope that while you are here, you will think only of your own amusement, and enjoy yourself in the way you like best.”

She spoke coldly and distantly, almost as if he had been a stranger to her.

“Do not speak in that tone, I beg of you,” he said, moving nearer to her, and making an effort to meet her eyes fully. “You are annoyed that I asked Miss Goldengay to let me go with her; but, I assure you, you are mistaken if you suppose I prefer—”

Marion interrupted him with a little chill laugh, saying,—

“There would be nothing remarkable in your preferring Maryla’s society. I know that she is more interesting than Ethel or I; but I thought—”

She paused for a moment. Mr. Knox, feeling almost equally angry with her and Maryla, took advantage of her silence to say,—

“I assure you that you misunderstand me; if I did not feel more grateful than I

can say for all the kindness which has been shown me in this house, I should be the most thankless of men. I must ask you to believe that I am not anticipating any enjoyment from my walk with Miss Goldengay; but it is necessary I should speak to her sometime, and the sooner the better, I think."

"I confess I do not understand," rather drily.

"I know you do not, and I cannot explain just now,—I must ask you to take my word for it."

He spoke with a sudden assumption of candour which would have made Maryla laugh, but which brought a rather less iron compression of Marion's lips.

"I do not understand what you can have to say to her," she said slowly, but less distantly than before. "Does she know what it is?"

“As far as I am aware, she has no idea,” he replied, longing for something to happen which would put an end to the conversation.

Something did happen. Maryla came in ready for walking, and saying,—

“If you are ready, Mr. Knox, we will go. The basket is in the hall; you can carry it.”

Stephen exchanged a few parting words with Marion, and then followed Maryla into the garden.

She was apparently in one of her most communicative moods, fresh air and sunshine acted upon her like a charm, and she appeared ready to talk to any one out of pure gladness of heart. They had not gone far when she stopped an old woman they met, and accosted her with “Good-morning, Mrs. Mason, how are you to-day?”

“Only middling, Miss Goldengay, I can’t say more.”

“I am sorry for that. What is the matter? you seemed very well the last time I saw you.”

“Well, you see, Miss, there’s Annie come to stay with us while Jem is in the hospital.”

“Annie? that is your daughter-in-law, is it not? You do not seem fond of her.”

“I can’t say I am, Miss. I often wonder what made our Jem marry her, for she’s *that* vulgar! I always say we’re vulgar enough, but I’m sure Annie’s ten times worse.”

Maryla’s eyes gleamed with amusement; but she bit her lips to hide a smile, and said gravely,—

“That is certainly a great pity. I know nothing more uncomfortable than to be

obliged to live with people more vulgar than ourselves."

"I wouldn't say *you* were vulgar, Miss," replied the woman impartially; "I've always said you were a real lady, and so have all the Stanedale folk!"

"You are very kind, and I am much obliged to you," said Maryla, and then she wished Mrs. Mason good-morning, and walked on with Stephen, who said,—

"What an insufferable old woman! How I do dislike the lower orders."

"I daresay, if we were to change places, they would dislike us equally," said Maryla serenely.

"I don't understand what pleasure *you* can find in talking to them," he went on almost crossly.

"Oh," she answered, "they are human, they have that in common with us. Some of their ways are strikingly like ours.

There is an old man who lives here, and is looked up to as a great authority on the weather. I met him once when I was on one of my expeditions and asked his opinion on the weather. Would it rain or keep fine? He gazed all around, and looked fixedly at the clouds; then he gave utterance to the oracular sentiment, 'Well, Miss, you may have rain, or you may not.' I do not know how, even in our position, artful dodging could have been better illustrated."

"Which had you," asked Stephen, with some show of interest.

"I hadn't."

They went on in silence. Stephen did not feel conversationally inclined. He was beginning to feel some nervousness about what he wanted to say, and he wondered how he would introduce the subject. The road along which they were walking also

absorbed his attention. It was long since they had left the village or even isolated houses behind them. The road, after rising gradually, had reached a wide elevated moor, across which it wound. On every side rose bare and lofty hills with no sign of life upon them; a few stunted, wind-swept firs were all the trees which had found courage to exist in this barren region. The rushing of a stream, somewhere out of sight, was the only sound which fell upon the ears. So far as Mr. Knox could see, he and his companion were the only living creatures in this region of silence and desolation. Since they had parted from Mrs. Mason they had met no one, and he calculated that by this time they must have walked at least six miles.

Maryla, too, had grown silent; she was walking at an easy, regular pace, neither swiftly nor slowly, which must enable her

to walk an immense distance without feeling fatigued. She had never had on any gloves, and by this time she had taken off her hat, and swung it from her hand. The sun glinted on her golden hair, making a kind of glory round her head, her black eyes were raised to the hills, and her lips a little parted as if to drink in the scented moorland air. There was an expression on her face, which only came there when she was out of doors, or, having just come in, was still under the influence of the sun and wind.

He watched her for some time with much curiosity. She walked differently from English girls; even her gown, though it was only cotton, seemed to hang upon her figure in a way he had never noticed in the dress of any other woman. She walked in silence for some time, and then she began to repeat half to herself,—

“Return, content ! for fondly I pursued
Even when a child the streams unheard, unseen,
Through tangled woods, impending rocks between ;
Or, free as air, with flying inquest view’d
The sullen reservoirs, whence their bold brood,
Pure as the morning, fretful, boisterous, keen,
Green as the salt sea-billows, white and green,
Poured down the hills a choral multitude.”

He had never heard her quote poetry before, and he was surprised to find her familiar with Wordsworth, but he merely asked,—

“Where does this road lead to ?”

“To the end of the world,” was her reply. “Wait a minute, and you will see.”

They were climbing a steep and stony bit of road as she spoke. When they had reached the top of the rise, she pointed before her, saying,—

“Now look.”

They stood on very high ground, and the hills towered above them on all sides. On

the right, the mountains descended, with a grand, smooth sweep, sheer into the little green valley lying at their feet. Straight in front rose a rampart of mighty mountains, beyond which only the imagination could reach. It was indeed the end of the world. Their path wound down into this valley, and by the side of the road rushed and roared a clear, cold mountain torrent. Maryla pointed to it, repeating,—

“Pure as the morning, fretful, boisterous, keen,
Green as the salt sea-billows, white and green.”

She stood in silence for a few minutes, then she laughed a little, saying,—

“A year or two ago there was a scheme for running a railroad through this valley.”

“Are we going down there?” asked Stephen.

“ Yes, and then up the hill on the other side to the Force.”

By the time they reached the magnificent waterfall, known as Ravensghyll Force, Stephen was exhausted and fainting for something to eat; but Maryla would not have lunch until she had been down at the foot of the waterfall, and seen the column of water fall a hundred feet into the deep, black pool below. It was rather a difficult place to get to, an awkward descent over broken, slippery rocks; and, as Stephen watched the girl's progress, he could not help admiring the light, graceful way in which she let herself go, almost letting herself fall from one level to another, and never making the least false step. She was perfectly at ease, and Stephen found himself thinking of Marion's dignity, and of how out of place it would have been here.

They had finished lunch, and Maryla had bathed her hands and her fingers, pink-tipped with handling ripe strawberries, in the stream below the Force. She now leaned back upon the soft heather, apparently quite happy with the sun streaming down upon her, and the subdued thunder of the Force in her ears. A dreamy look had come upon her face; she seemed scarcely conscious of her companion's existence. He suddenly reminded her of it.

“Do you remember, Miss Goldengay, why I asked to come here with you?”

“You did not tell me. I took you on trust.”

He had forgotten it was to Marion he had said he must speak to Maryla, and he was annoyed that she had found him out in a mistake at the very beginning.

“I daresay you have been wondering.”

“No, I have not thought of it.”

“It was about my visit to Haygarth yesterday.”

“Oh, very well, suppose you begin.”

“It was not the first time I had been there.”

She said nothing, but he fancied the expression of her face changed a little. He found it rather a difficult subject to get into, but he must go on now.

“I was there three years ago.”

He had laid a little emphasis on the last three words, and after having said them, he made a pause.

“I daresay you did not find many changes, though you seem to attach some importance to the *three* years.”

“I found that the clergyman and clerk were both new men since that time.”

“Had they been baptized?” asked Maryla indifferently.

“ They were dead.”

“ Well, they were not friends of mine. I don’t even know what they were called.”

“ If I remember rightly, you said it was three years since you had last been there.”

“ How you beat about the bush ! I wish you would come to the point. What do you mean by these mysterious hints ? ”

“ I think we were there at the same time.”

“ Did you see me ? ”

“ No, I had never seen you ; but I had heard you.”

“ *Heard* me ! What in the name of fortune do you mean ? This is as bad as being peeped at from behind window-curtains when I came in from a walk.”

“ If you will allow me, I will tell you what happened to me on my first visit to Haygarth.”

“Tell, by all means; I can’t conceive what mystery you have got in hand.”

He told her the story and Maryla listened in silence, though not without an occasional twitching of the lips. When he had finished speaking, she looked at him serenely and said,—

“Well?”

“Well? how well? I do not think it is well at all.”

“What happened next? I suppose you did not come all this way to tell me that little tale.”

“I was sure I should recognize that laughter if I ever heard it again.”

“And have you ever heard it again?”

“I heard it the night you laughed at Mr. Henn’s story about the curate.”

“Oh!” with an expression of enlightenment, “that was what made you look so queer; not a pain in your heart or head at

all. What a curious coincidence. May I ask what conclusion you came to?"

"I should think you might guess!"

"Perhaps I might, but I should never think of doing so. No woman in her senses would hazard a guess at such a point in such a story. I prefer that you should tell me."

"I naturally supposed that you had been married."

"Why?"

"You must admit that I had solid grounds to go upon."

"What kind of grounds?" she said flippantly, "coffee grounds? I don't see why you should suppose any such thing; you had not even seen me."

"Well, I did suppose it, and as I could not rest in uncertainty, I went to Haygarth again on purpose to find out the truth."

"What did you do when you got there?"

“ I went to the church and consulted the register. I found out that, as I supposed, you had been married on the day I first visited Haygarth.

His voice was cold and hard from suppressed excitement, and he waited eagerly for her reply. She did not keep him waiting.

“ You went over on purpose to do that ? Your tale about wanting to sketch at Brigg was a sham ? ”

“ I did sketch at Brigg,” he interposed ; but she went on without heeding him,—

“ You looked through the registers to find my name, to pry out what I had chosen to keep private ? ”

“ I went to verify my suspicions, and I did verify them.”

“ Sneak ! ”

The blood rushed to Stephen’s face, and

he sprang to his feet, almost choking with rage.

“How dare you?” he cried at last, glaring down at the girl as she sat among the heather.

“Sneak!” she repeated, looking straight up at him with eyes before which his fell. “It is a pity,” she went on, “that you are not a member of the secret police, if there is such an institution in England.”

“You have no right to speak like that,” he said at last; “I had reasons for what I did.”

“Oh, no doubt, reasons can always be found for anything.”

He said nothing, and after sitting in silence for a few minutes, she began to laugh purely and unrestrainedly the very laughter which had twice already upset Stephen’s equanimity.

He looked at her almost with disgust.

“I don’t know what you see to laugh at,” he said at last.

“I never thought that my laughter would play me such a trick as that.”

“Then you confess it?”

“I don’t see what would be the use of denying it.”

“You were really married in that church three years ago?”

“I really was.”

“What about your husband?”

“Well, what about him?”

“I know his name. I wrote it down in my pocket-book.”

“Was it Maurice Wingfield?”

She pronounced the first name with a soft little foreign accent, which made it sound more musical than the English form. He thought it would be agreeable to be called Maurice, and addressed in such a

tone. Then he hardened his heart, and said sternly,—

“Where is he? How is it that you do not live with him?”

She smiled sweetly, saying,—

“Oh, that is my secret.”

“Will you not tell me?”

“No, indeed,” shaking her head, and the last word half lost in a ripple of laughter.

“Why not?”

“If for no other reason, because you want very much to know.”

I can find out without your help,” he said, nettled at the tone in which she spoke. “I tell you I have got his name.”

She went into another fit of laughter, and then said,—

“Oh, find out by all means—if you can. I see now why you told me that both the clergyman and clerk are dead; but it seems

to me that it is more to my advantage than yours."

"Does Mr. Richardson know of this?"

"Nobody knows but you, and I, and my husband."

"He is alive?"

"I have never heard of his death."

"Do you often see him?"

"I have not seen him once since we parted soon after my marriage."

"Why was that?"

"Just so, why was that?"

"I wish you would answer my questions properly; it is a very serious matter."

"I do not acknowledge your right to ask me any questions at all, and the matter is just as serious as I choose to make it."

"In that case it is nothing more than a jest."

"Yes, but a very good one; the best in the world."

“ You are the only girl I ever heard of who considered her marriage a jest.”

“ Perhaps I am the only girl whose marriage was a jest.”

“ What ! you were never married at all ? ”

“ Oh, yes, I was ; with book and bell, or whatever else is necessary, by the clergyman of the parish, and with the proper number of witnesses.”

“ If everything was in proper order, why do you say it was a jest ? ”

“ To tease you, you looked so ferocious. You have no sense of humour.”

“ I confess,” he said drily, “ that I do not see the fun of the thing ; to me it appears a very serious matter.”

“ So you said before. Good gracious ! ” she went on with lazy amusement. “ What a tragedy you make out of nothing ; you are as bad as Marion.”

Stephen frowned. He saw no reason for mentioning Marion's name, and he only said coldly,—

“Of course my duty in this matter is quite plain; you must see it as well as I do.”

“Opinions differ on even the simplest points. I should prefer you to tell me what it is.”

“Since Mr. Richardson is still in ignorance, it is my duty to tell him.”

“Oh!” she cried, as though struck with amazement, “you would surely never be so foolish.”

“What do you mean by foolish?”

“You would be throwing away your very strongest weapon against me.”

“You speak as if we were deadly enemies.”

“I do not think we love one another just now. You would probably hate me

more when your scheme of revenge had failed."

"I don't know what you mean by schemes of revenge. Perhaps you will enlighten me."

"Certainly. At this present time I am known to nobody beyond Stanedale. If people were told I was married, though of course a due amount of open reprobation would be displayed, there is not a girl in the place who would not in her heart envy me for being the heroine of such an adventure. As for making ill-feeling between me and Mr. Richardson, you could not do such a thing. He would be hurt for a time that I had kept a secret from him; but, after that, we should be better friends than ever."

She paused, and he was silent, conscious that there was much truth in what she said.

“ You see,” she went on, “ if you tell now you gain nothing, but if you wait a few years, perhaps even a shorter time, the whole situation will have changed. I suppose you do not imagine I am going to live in Stanedale all my life, or that I shall always be as unknown as I am now? In a few years, I shall probably have made a great name, and, as a necessary consequence, a great many enemies. Then will be the time to bring out your information with effect. If you only bide your time you will have me completely in your power.”

He listened in great surprise, for he at once saw the importance of what she said. He remembered Mr. Richardson’s prophecy, and he felt that, if it were ever fulfilled, he would hold a terrible weapon against her. But what had possessed her to offer him such a weapon? Was it

sheer recklessness and devil-may-care spirit, or had she some deep plot hidden under her careless words? He stole a glance at her face, but it did not suggest plots, and he had only to remember the carelessness she had shown about this very marriage in question, to convince him that in making this strange proposition, she was only acting in accordance with her nature. But he asked,—

“What makes you say that? If I were an unscrupulous man I might make terrible use of your admissions, and wreck your whole life.”

“We are not now concerned with my motives. It is quite possible that I have none, and that I only tell you because I rather enjoy the thought of having a secret enemy.”

Then it was, as he had supposed, pure recklessness and want of ballast.

“ Well,” she said, after a short silence, “ are you still determined to tell him ? ”

He did not reply at once. When he thought of her face and tone, when she had called him sneak, he felt his blood boil, and an almost irresistible impulse to go and proclaim her secret to the four winds of heaven. But when he reflected upon the power which the possession of this secret gave him, of the tacit influence which his knowledge would enable him to exercise over her, that within certain limits she would be within his grasp, and under his control, his head turned ; the temptation was too strong for him, and he replied,—

“ No, on second thoughts I shall not tell him.”

She did not speak, only smiled ; a smile of pleasure and self-satisfaction which he could not understand.

Soon afterwards they set out on the homeward way, and walked almost in silence. Stephen was lost in thought, and Maryla appeared to be absorbed in watching the afternoon lights and shadows on the hills,—the shadows deeper, the sunlight mellowed than when they had passed in the morning. When they reached home Mr. Knox felt broken with fatigue, while Maryla looked as fresh and cool as when she had left home. Her face wore its usual aspect of careless content, and she had a smile and a jest for Mr. Richardson when they met in the garden. Stephen watched her talking to her guardian, heard her laughter ring out on the air, and marvelled.

CHAPTER VII.

“ Love no man in good earnest.”

THE sun was again setting over Stanedale Pike, and again Maryla was watching it from the moors on the other side of the lake. This time she was not alone, Mr. Richardson was with her; she had spent the whole day out of doors, and he, knowing in which direction she had gone, had come out to meet her. They had been talking of many things, and just now were silent, watching the sun sink lower and lower in a stormy pomp of crimson clouds which boded ill for the morrow. The light thrown on the water was almost lurid, the little clouds which floated in the sky were all tinged with red.

It was earlier in the day than when Maryla had been here on the night of Stephen Knox's arrival; there was plenty of time to watch the sun sink behind the cairn which crowned the Pike, and walk leisurely home without incurring any reprimand from Marion.

They were silent till the last scrap of the crimson ball had disappeared behind the mountain, and then Maryla roused herself from her reflections, and asked,—

“When do you suppose the solemn column is going to propose to Marion?”

She spoke of Mr. Knox by a name she had been moved to bestow upon him by his unbending dignity, and Mr. Richardson responded to it at once. He knit his eyebrows, and ran his fingers through his hair, as he replied,—

“My dear child, I have been asking myself that question for some little time now.”

“He has been here a month ; it is quite time he came to the point, and went his way.”

“Have you had enough of him ?”

“Quite. I have studied him through and through. I know him perfectly, and I wish him gone with all my heart.”

“I am glad you can wish anything with all your heart ; it argues a state of wholeness and soundness which is encouraging.”

“You will not need encouragement on that point as long as I am here. Stanedale does not present many opportunities of taking that particular disease.”

“One at a time is enough.”

“So it is, if it be only strong enough. So let us rather say the temptations of Stanedale are wanting in strength, as well as number.”

“But, to go back to the solemn column,

do you really think you have mastered his nature?"

"I have felt sure of it since the day he went with me to Ravensghyll,—do you remember? We had been talking, and I gave him a decision to make. I asked him a question, to which his answer had to be yes or no. According to my observation, he should have said no. With his character, I felt sure he must say it."

"From your tone, I judge that you were not disappointed."

"No," smiling, "he came up to my expectations. If he had known, though, how much depended on it, I do not think he would have said it."

"What do you think of him?"

"I think he would be a dangerous enemy to have. He is vindictive, and he cannot endure to be laughed at."

“It is fortunate that Marion will never feel tempted to laugh at him.”

“Yes, what a solemn couple they will make. They would balance a whole nation of flimsy people like myself.”

Mr. Richardson laughed, and took her hand in his, fondling it gently, and looking with pleasure at its smooth whiteness.

“I have wanted to speak to you about Knox and Marion,” he said, “I am not altogether easy about him.”

“You don’t mean,” turning and looking straight at him, “that you think he is going to cry off?”

“I am afraid it looks very like it.”

There was a somewhat lengthy pause, and then she said in a tone of the profoundest conviction,—

“How unutterably disgusting!”

“Why disgusting?”

“It would upset all our plans. You

know how often we have imagined the time when either one or both of them would be married, and you and I should be left alone to vagabondize as we chose, live where we liked, and enjoy ourselves on the Continent. You know we have looked forward to it, and talked about it as a thing sure to come in its own good time. If our hopes are to be dashed to the ground just when we thought they were about to be realized, it will be too provoking."

She spoke in a tone of genuine disappointment, almost resentment, and Mr. Richardson looked rather relieved as he heard her; then he said,—

"Is it possible that during the last week or two you have buoyed yourself up with such hopes?"

"I have not observed them lately; I have taken things for granted."

“It was a mistake, and I almost think Marion is beginning to see it now.”

“Then you will have to have an explanation with him. How exasperating! I am very sorry for you.”

“I suppose it is one of the pains attached to the pleasure of having daughters.”

“Yes; be thankful your ward will never cause you any such worry.”

“How am I to feel sure?” smiling at her again.

“Marion is the kind of girl who would break her heart, and make a lifelong trouble of such a thing. You know how quickly I recover from any physical disorder, and it would be the same with any mental disturbance. I should recover my balance at once.”

“Ah,” he replied, “that is an idea; have you thought it out at all?”

“I was thinking of it just before you joined me. You know there are certain people of unsound constitution with whom the slightest ailment becomes something serious ; if they scratch their finger, the scratch becomes a festering sore, and if they have a really serious illness, they never get over it. In the same way there are people with naturally unhealthy minds, to whom every trifle appears in the light of a calamity. The least pin-prick to their vanity or pride becomes a sore which is long in healing ; and if they have a disappointment in love, or ambition, or lose a friend by death or estrangement, they are never the same again. Their minds are unhealthy and the wound never heals. Just as a healthy body recovers quickly and surely from any physical disturbance, so a healthy mind regains its normal state after any shock, with equal ease. Of course,

I know many people would not admit that. It is interesting to receive such a mental blow that your mind is never the same again, to go through such seas of trouble that all power of pleasure and enjoyment is washed out of you, and you spend the remainder of your life with a clouded brow and sorrowful eyes. People like that are considered very much more interesting, and to have stronger and deeper feelings, than those who regain their mental balance after terrible experiences, and come out of their troubles as sound as before they went into them. The last-named people are liable to be considered as very frivolous and shallow, powerless to take any deep impression, or to keep it if taken. In reality it is the reverse. People who get over their troubles quickly are stronger than those who can never shake them off. It is morbid and unhealthy to

remain all your life a victim to some loss or disappointment, and it is only because the majority of people are more or less morbid and unhealthy that lives 'blasted by misfortune' and such calamities, have become more interesting than healthy natures which throw their troubles off."

Mr. Richardson had listened attentively, though not without smiling from time to time. When she had finished, he said,—

"Your theory is ingenious, and at least has the merit of originality. You spoke so vehemently, I thought you must be fighting your own battle."

"Perhaps I was. You know that, if Marion and I were both to suffer a disappointment in love, we should each bear the disappointment in the way I have described, and each be judged in the way I have described."

"Probably you are right. Still, if we

had time, I think I could point out some flaws in your argument. Remember the analogy between mind and body is not perfect."

"Yes, you are right, the argument might lead us a very long way and leave us in a blind alley at the end, all the more so because I should be secretly fighting my own theory. I have a sneaking hope that mine may be one of the constitutions you describe."

Mr. Richardson laughed, and raised his eyebrows, saying,—

"What! you want to undergo the common lot of womanhood after all?"

"Not for the mere pleasure of the thing, but professionally. I should be able to describe it so much better if I had once felt it. I hate bad work, and I am afraid that at first, at any rate, I must fail there."

"Oh, my dear child, you must not make

mountains out of molehills. Look at the average novel, and tell me how much of it you suppose was drawn from nature and how much from the imagination, more or less pure and simple, of the author?"

"Yes, yes; but then mine are not going to be average novels; at least, we hope not. If I find they rise no higher than that, I shall put a stop to them at once."

She shook her head back as she spoke, and the peculiar inspired look came into her face, which Stephen had seen more than once, without being able to explain it.

"Have no fears on that head," said Mr. Richardson, in a tone of calm conviction. "Your work will not be average work; the only danger will be lest it should not be average enough. At first, at any rate, it will be wise to consult the popular taste and to think rather of what will be

acceptable to people, than of what is wholly true to nature. You don't like that, I know," laying his hand on hers, "but, if you want to make your way, it must be. Many an ambitious young author has come to grief on that rock. Don't make your characters too high toned; if you do, people won't read your books, and I want your books to be read. People don't like high-toned characters; they have an uneasy feeling that they are a tacit reproach to themselves. People don't want to be made better, and it is a great mistake, and one into which a young author is peculiarly liable to fall, to suppose that they do. They want to be left in peace, and that is why the average in everything is so popular. If a person who sets up to be a leader of humanity pitches his standard above the moral stature of his followers, he will pay for it by having

no followers at all. If he is a preacher, his church will be empty, he will probably be persecuted and driven from the place; if he is a writer, people won't read his books. And remember that from that tribunal of the public there is no appeal. It is of no use to feel conscious of merit, of honesty and rectitude of purpose; if the public is not with you, it is against you. And of him against whom it is, one might almost say 'Better for that man if he had never been born.' The same may be said of a woman with ten-fold truth. You remember the words,—

“‘The brave, impetuous heart yields everywhere
To the subtle, contriving head ;
Great qualities are trodden down,
And littleness united
Is become invincible.’

There is a vast amount of truth in those lines.”

“ And you think there is danger of that kind in store for me ? ”

“ Yes, my child, assuredly. You have something worth saying, and you know how to say it. The only danger is lest you choose your time wrongly ; there is so much in doing or speaking just at the right time.”

“ The time will arrange itself ; the thing is to have something to say, a message from another world ; to have a living immortal soul within one, not a dead stony image of one’s lower self.”

Mr. Richardson eyed her keenly.

“ I like to hear you speak like that,” he said, when she had finished. “ If I were ever moved to prayer, it should be that I might be alive when your triumph comes.”

She caught her breath, and involuntarily straightened herself against the pang which shot through her heart.

“Of course you will be alive!” she said half jestingly, half vehemently. Then she went on,—

“You are not worse, you have no fresh symptoms?”

“No, I am only more conscious of the old ones. But, my love, you must not look like that, or I shall be sorry that I told you.”

“No, no, you must not feel sorry, or think I am going to be weak. I can be as strong as you, and shall help and comfort you to the end. Only it came so suddenly, and latterly I have thought you seemed better.”

Her voice was low and faltering, unsteady to brokenness. Her whole face had changed; it was sad and wistful, and she fixed her dark eyes yearningly on Mr. Richardson's face.

He drew her closer to him, and,

instead of answering her, said half playfully,—

“ Will it be a great trouble to you when I die ? ”

“ Oh, do not speak of it ! the mere thought terrifies me. What shall I do without your advice and help ? I shall be so lonely, I dare not think of it.”

There was a world of love in her voice and words, and when she had finished speaking, Mr. Richardson put his hand under her upturned chin and kissed her, saying,—

“ If any of our Stanedale friends were to see and hear you now, Maryla, they would stare and rub their eyes, and say, ‘ Sure this is never she ! ’ ”

She laughed a little, and then said jealously,—

“ You have not told the others ? ”

“ No,” he said thoughtfully ; “ I am afraid that when I must tell them, they

will reproach me for my reticence. But I do not feel as if I could confide in Marion, so I shall leave them both in the dark as long as possible."

"It will be much the best ; if they knew, they would leave you no peace, you would be worried to death."

They sat for some time longer, and then Maryla noticed the evening chill, and thought they had better go. So hand in hand, they came across the moors and down into the valley towards home.

Marion and Ethel had spent the afternoon in the little upstairs sitting-room, sacred to themselves and their needlework. It was a very pretty little room into which no other member of the family ever set foot. To Maryla it was ground as unknown as was to them their father's study, where Maryla spent most of her time when she

was in the house. In this room the sisters were perfectly secure from interruption, and they could look and speak just as they pleased.

They were very busy, working for a bazaar which a few enterprising spirits in Stanedale had set on foot, and in which they took a keen interest. Marion's face no longer wore the calmly satisfied look which had clothed it as she presided at the tea-table on the evening of Mr. Knox's arrival. She was both thinner and paler, and her mouth had a downward droop, which was yet half effaced by the naturally haughty curve of the lips, as though she were undergoing a continual mental struggle. She plied her needle listlessly ; it was easy to see that her mind was only half in her work. Ethel, on the contrary, drew her needle in and out with almost more than her usual vigour. She broke a some-

what lengthy silence by saying in the tone of one who continues an interrupted conversation,—

“I don’t at all see why you should take such a gloomy view, Marion. I don’t really think that Mr. Knox has done anything to justify it.”

“You never knew him as I did,” replied Marion; “it is not to be expected that you should notice his manner so closely.”

“You are imagining all kinds of things which have no existence outside your own brain. If you only listened to your reason you would know at once that you are inventing your own troubles.”

“I wish I could think so,” said the elder girl; “but I know, I can feel, that he is no longer the same. But, if he has changed, I daresay I can change with equal ease.”

“Now,” said Ethel, “you are going to

try to persuade yourself that you do not care for him any more, when you know quite well that you have not changed a bit."

Marion bit her lip, and lifted her head higher.

"I hope I shall never be so weak as to care for a man who has grown indifferent to me."

"He is not indifferent," persisted Ethel valiantly, for she firmly believed that she was speaking the truth. "I do not think you have any right to accuse him of want of faith, because he sometimes pays Maryla a little attention."

The mention of Maryla's name seemed to fan the smouldering flame of Marion's anger into life.

"There is not the slightest reason why he should pay Maryla attention, either much or little. He goes out of his way

to do it. They were strangers when he came here. I do not see why they could not have remained strangers."

Ethel said nothing, and presently Marion went on,—

"It is all Maryla's fault. He has never been the same since that day they went to Ravensghyll together."

"Maryla did not invite him to go with her, she put difficulties in the way."

"Difficulties which were easily overcome, and which made him want to go more than ever. He has never been the same since."

"You fancy so, because he never told you what he said to her."

"Why did he not tell me?" dropping her work into her lap. "If there was anything serious between us, I had a right to know; and if there was not, he had no business to come here at all."

“It must have been something connected with Maryla, of course, and perhaps she did not wish to have it spoken of.”

“Then it was a secret,” with growing anger; “and I dispute his right to have secrets with her. How came he to have any knowledge of her affairs? he had never seen her before he came here.”

“It was strange, I have thought so myself,” admitted Ethel.

“I cannot bear to think of it,” said her sister, with some excitement. “I hate to see him look at her, and he looks at her very often.”

“I can understand that,” said Ethel rather deprecatingly. “I like to look at her too. She is very beautiful you must confess. But at the same time, I don’t believe any man would prefer her to you. I don’t think men care to have girls like Maryla for their wives.”

“No; but they care to have them to look at, and talk to, and that is the principal thing.”

“Don’t be cynical,” said Ethel cheerfully, in reply to the undisguised bitterness of her sister’s voice. “The man would not be worth thinking about, who, after growing fond of you, could transfer his affections to a Maryla Goldengay. Why her very name is against her, it is like that of a pantomime-girl.”

Marion smiled faintly, though immediately afterwards, she hardened her voice again, saying,—

“I do not know that he ever did get fond of me, as you call it. We never had any proof.”

“Oh, none at all,” with smiling sarcasm. “He never paid you any attention while we were away; he did not ask to come here very soon after we had come home. Such

behaviour from a man to a woman is generally, I believe, taken to mean that he rather dislikes her."

Marion smiled again. Her woman's instinct told her more truly than Ethel's superficial common sense, but she could not help being swayed by it, it fell in so with her inclinations.

"Why does he stay here," went on Ethel, "if he does not want you?"

"Why does he not ask me to marry him if he does want me?"

"Oh, I fancy he is rather slow in everything he does. He is not a person with whom one associates the idea of haste. And if it comes to that, if he wants Maryla, why does he not ask her?"

In her kindness of heart she had blundered terribly. Marion went crimson and then very white, and she quivered from head to foot.

“Don’t, even in fun, say those things, Ethel,” she said nervously. “You have never felt as I feel now, and I hope you never may. If I really thought there was anything between them I would never speak to Maryla again as long as I live.”

Ethel was silent, unable to follow her sister’s mood. She was passionately fond of, but far removed from understanding her. She had never yet had any love affair, and she was perfectly unconscious of the stabs she was giving to Marion’s pride. She thought that common sense was all on her side of the question. And beyond that she could not see. After a short silence she went on,—

“It used to be you who found fault with me for saying hard things of Maryla, but I don’t think you are fair to her now. I do not think she cares for Mr. Knox at all.”

"I daresay not. It would not be necessary for her to like him; she could do all the mischief she wanted without that."

"I have often heard her making fun of him with papa."

Marion clenched her hand with anger.

"Have you? I could have believed it of her, it is just the kind of thing she would delight to do. But I did not think papa would have joined in that."

"He thinks everything she does right. If she were to make fun of us, his own daughters, I believe he would join in. He is infatuated about her."

"Yes," said Marion, "people have infatuations about such girls as Maryla; for you and me they have only a calm, unemotional friendship."

"If what you say about Mr. Knox be true, and an infatuation means to come

and stay in people's houses under false pretences, I am glad we do not inspire infatuations. At the same time," she went on, returning to her wonted common-sense mood, "I have observed that people generally grow tired of infatuations and are very glad to come back to calm, unemotional affection. If Maryla really has—"

Marion interrupted her with a little stamp of the foot.

"Ethel!" she cried excitedly, "how can you go on like that? You make me hate Maryla. I have always disliked her and her manner, but I thought I was wrong and I did my best to hide it and overcome it. She has always robbed me. She robbed me of my father when mama died; I did my best to take her place, I wanted to make papa forget his loss. He would not let me. While he was at home

he shut himself up in his study, and then he went away and stayed for years. When he came home again he brought Maryla with him, and I saw at once that she had his heart. When I offered to do anything for him, it was always ‘No, thank you, my dear, Maryla will do that; she remembers how I had it in Germany.’ They had a thousand remembrances and associations in common; he had forgotten all our tastes and feelings. He cannot complain if I am cold now; he refused my love when I offered it to him. I cannot change now. Maryla stole him from me, and now she has stolen what was more to me than even papa’s love. I cannot forgive.”

She paused, her chest heaving, her lips trembling so that she could not speak. She had never thought that even to Ethel

she could say all she had just said. The double failure humiliated her bitterly, and she would never forget the cause of her humiliation. When the conversation had begun she had had no intention of saying such things, she had been led on, and could not now retreat. She could only repeat,—

“She has robbed me twice, and if she can do it a third time she will.”

Ethel was silent. She did not know what to say. Her attempts at comfort seemed only to irritate her sister, and in what concerned their father, she agreed with her. While they sat silent, Ethel distressed and half-frightened, Marion proud, angry and sore-hearted, they heard the garden gate open and shut and Maryla's voice saying,—

“The house looks dead; I wonder where the column is.”

“How imprudent you are,” replied Mr. Richardson; “every window in the house is wide open.”

“He would never apply it to himself. If he heard me, he would solemnly wonder of whom I could be speaking.”

“To please me, be more circumspect.”

“That is another thing altogether; you have my promise.”

The two girls heard every word of the little dialogue, and as Maryla finished speaking, Marion turned abruptly and left the room in silence.

CHAPTER VIII.

“ Would I had never seen her ! ”

MR. KNOX was far from happy. He was ready to curse the day on which he had come to Stanedale, and yet he could not tear himself away. The thought of binding himself to Marion was hateful to him ; yet he was tortured with the feeling that if he had changed, she had not. He knew she loved him, and in his calmer and more reasonable moments he told himself that, as she had given a hundred tacit and perhaps unconscious indications of her love, he was bound to respect such confessions, and to ask her to be his wife. At least, he owed it to her to let her choose if she

would marry him or not. He thought these things when he was alone in his bedroom at night, when the whole house was still and he leaned out into the half darkness of a summer night and heard the beck flowing over the stones. Then he was alone, neither Marion nor Maryla was present; the one to reproach him and make him feel guilty, with her cold, proud English face, which had lately grown a little disdainful, the other to torment and madden him with her strange beauty. At these times he told himself that all his duty was to Marion, and he resolved firmly that on the morrow he would overcome his infatuation, bring matters to a close, and ask her to marry him, thus fulfilling the intention with which he had come to Standedale more than a month before.

But when the morning came, when he saw the sun glint on Maryla's golden hair,

looked into the velvety depths of her eyes, heard her voice and laughter, and felt the light touch of her hand as she bade him good morning, all his good resolutions melted like the hoarfrost of early autumn ; he felt that the struggle was not ended at all, that it never would be ended, but must go on as long as his life lasted, renewing itself every morning, to be fought through the whole day, leaving him at night with a sense of exhaustion and defeat.

He knew now that his love for Maryla was the one passion of his life ; instinct told him that he would never feel a second time what he felt now. He was drifting along a stream, the current of which he was powerless to resist. His one wish was to be in Maryla's presence, to be near her, to speak to and look at her, to get her if possible to look at him. He began to

feel afraid of being in the presence of both girls at the same time. He knew that his remaining at Beckbridge was villainy, and he groaned under a sense of sin which he was yet powerless to throw off. He was unconscious of Marion's presence except from the sense of irritation which sometimes accompanied it; he had to exert all his strength to prevent himself following Maryla wherever she went. He sat often with his eyes fixed on the ground, or looking blankly out of the window, because he knew that if he raised or turned them aside they would fall on Maryla. Sometimes he felt reckless and told himself that he would stay, he did not care what the consequences might be; he would stay until he was driven away.

His mental discomfort was in no way lessened by the reflection that even did Maryla return his love, she was not free

to do so, that an insuperable barrier to their union lay in the fact that she was married already. When he thought of that marriage, he felt like a trapped tiger. The whole thing was such a mystery, and yet he could not doubt its truth. He could not now tell Mr. Richardson about it,—if he did he would be throwing away his one weapon without in the least benefitting himself. Whatever Mr Richardson decided to do, he would be allowed no share in the proceedings.

He was thinking about all these things as he walked slowly along alone. He had come out after the early dinner, because the house seemed too small for him. Maryla had gone out in the morning, he knew not where. He had purposely abstained from asking her, thinking that he would give up this day to Marion. All the morning he had kept his resolve; he

had read aloud to the sisters as they sat over their bazaar work. He was fond of reading aloud, and knew that he read well. He had looked forward to spending the afternoon in the same way, free from temptation, if free from pleasure. But at dinner, Marion had said she and her sister must go to the Rectory. He had walked there with them, and then turned aside to pursue his own thoughts undisturbed.

The road he had chosen was favourable to such a purpose. It led out of the high-road, and wound up hill and down between rich overhanging woods to a small and very beautiful lake called High Tarn. The water lay in a hollow, with rough, heathy hills surrounding it, and a plantation of Scotch firs growing almost to the water's edge. A wreath of water-lilies extended all round the tarn a few yards from the shore. There was

not a single house all along the road, and few people ever came near the place. He had turned along the lane at first, hardly conscious of where he was going; but when after walking a little way he had lifted his head and looked around him, he was glad he had come here.

Just before reaching the hollow where the lake lay, he came to a gate. As he held it open in his hand he saw a sight which made him stand still for a minute, and then the gate slipped from his grasp and fell to with a loud crash.

Down in the hollow at the edge of the water sat Maryla, her hat, as usual, on the ground, her hair falling over her shoulders and, seated as she was, lying around her on the grass. She appeared to be in the act of twisting it up into the heavy coils in which she usually wore it, for she had one long lock like a golden

rope in her hands. At the sound of the gate falling to, she looked up and saw Stephen.

He would have been content to stand and gaze at her, but seeing he was discovered, he was forced to come forward. He walked slowly down towards her, so slowly that by the time he had reached her side she had twisted up all her hair and turned her head to him dressed as he was accustomed to see it.

He did not speak ; no words suggested themselves to him. She began at once with her usual ease,—

“I suppose you are too shocked to speak? Have you met many women who dress their hair out-of-doors and use a lake for a looking-glass?”

As she spoke she bent dangerously far over the water, and looked at her reflection in the still black depths.

“Take care what you are doing!” he said almost below his breath. He dared not lay his hand upon her to restrain her.

“If you come upon people in unexpected places and at unexpected times, you must expect to find them doing unexpected things.”

“Has not that rather a Hibernian savour?” he asked, catching at anything which might furnish a remark. “How could I expect unexpected things?”

“Oh, very easily, if you are prepared for anything, and I thought that was one of the signs by which one might tell a wise man.”

“Do you call me a wise man?” he asked, with rather a melancholy smile.

“I said, ‘if you are prepared for everything.’”

He laughed shortly, and said,—

“I did not expect to find you here.”

“It is rather a favourite place of mine.”

“It is very lonely. I remember thinking so when I came here once with Miss Richardson and her sister.”

His invocation of Marion was a confession of weakness. Maryla asked unconsciously,—

“Where are they? How is it you are not with them now?”

He frowned as he told her how he had spent the morning and what had hindered a like disposal of the afternoon. She laughed and shrugged her shoulders when he told her about the bazaar and the meeting which the girls were attending at the Rectory. Then she made some biting speeches about the Stanedale people and laughed at him when he ventured on a reproof. At last she collected her things

and said she was going home. He might accompany her or stay behind as he listed.

“I will come with you,” he replied. “I promised to call at the Rectory for Miss Richardson.”

“You are too late; they will have left before this,” and she held out her watch for him to look at.

He bit his lips genuinely annoyed. When he met Marion at tea, it would be impossible in Maryla’s presence to give any reason but the right one for his non-appearance.

“If I go now I may be able to join her on the way.”

“Possibly.”

He rose and stood hesitatingly for a moment, then he looked down at Maryla, and asked,—

“Are you not coming?”

“Not as things have turned out. You will have to hurry. I dislike hurry, and so I shall let you go alone and follow at my leisure.”

He could not change again, so he set off alone, and almost ran along the lane leading to the high-road along which Marion and her sister must come. When he got to the road, he saw them coming slowly along, and he uttered a sigh of relief.

“We thought you were not coming,” said Ethel when they met.

“I went too far and forgot the time. I have been hurrying back, hoping I should meet you half-way.”

As he spoke he took his usual place by Marion's side and she began to speak of something else. The moment was gone and no mention had been made of Miss Goldengay. If later she referred to their

meeting by the lake he would stand convicted of want of truth.

She did refer to it. Whether innocently or with malicious intent Stephen could not tell. Her face was the picture of innocence, but Mr. Knox was beginning to understand that manner.

“Well,” she said at tea, “did you meet?”

She addressed no one in particular and Marion asked with a little astonishment,—

“Did who meet whom?”

“Did Mr. Knox meet you? He thought he might join you on the way from the Rectory,—I thought he was too late.”

“Mr. Knox did meet us,” replied Marion, and nothing more was said; but whether she knew it or not, Maryla made two bitter enemies from that moment.

Stephen was bitterly angry with her, and on the following evening he resolved

to give her a sight of the whip which he kept concealed. Suddenly, without any warning, he turned to Marion and asked,—

“Did you ever know anything of a man called Maurice Wingfield?”

Mr. Richardson was not present, and Stephen, as he spoke, avoided meeting Maryla’s eyes; but he could not help glancing at her, and he saw that after an almost imperceptible change of countenance, she was herself again. Marion and Ethel, in answer to his question, replied that they knew nothing of such a person.

“He was never in this neighbourhood?”

“Never,” replied Ethel; “it is the first time I have heard such a name.”

Maryla said nothing, and scarcely seemed to heed the discussion. But she

presently got up and left the room, without saying where she was going.

She went into the garden, and then through the gate, and seated herself upon the bridge which connected the house with the road. She leaned over it and looked down into the swiftly-flowing beck; her lips curled into a smile, and she said in a whisper,—

“I suppose that is the column’s idea of fencing.”

She sat still for a few minutes and then left the bridge and walked slowly down to the lake. When she got to the water’s edge she paused and began to speak half aloud.

“He is a fiend! If he is going to play me tricks like that, he must be got rid of. I thought I heard Mr. Richardson’s step outside, and I was horribly frightened; fortunately the column had no idea how

frightened. The only thing is to play a bold game, and rather invite him to tell than seem to fear it. If Mr. Richardson knew, I believe it would kill him. How could we be so inconceivably foolish as to leave the register like that, and the clergyman and clerk both to die ! It is too late to do anything now ; fortunately I have succeeded in putting him on the wrong track, but still he must be got rid of. It was a desperate thing to give him that weapon for the future, but I could do nothing else. I wish Maurice was not quite so far away ; he might be of some use now. Mr. Richardson shall never know, whatever straits I am put to. He shall not know."

CHAPTER IX.

“One scene
Of excellent dissembling.”

It had rained all the morning ; but after dinner it cleared, and Maryla set out to go to Hawkswater. Though she did not know it, she was followed by Stephen Knox. He had seen her go out at the gate, and, on the spur of the moment, he had snatched up his hat and resolved to follow her as he had done once before. As he climbed the steep hill behind the station, threaded the lanes through the high open fields at the top and breathed the strong fresh air of early autumn, as he strode over the moors, he thought almost uninter-

ruptedly of that first time he had come here. Then, he had felt only repugnance to the girl who was walking in front of him; now—his face grew dark when he thought of what he felt now, and of all that was involved in that feeling. There was also the knowledge that, even did she love him, and he told himself fiercely that she did, she must, during the last few days, since he had found her at High Tarn, she had given what he considered unmistakable signs that he was more to her than a mere friend. Even did she love him as he loved her, she could never be his; this absent, unknown husband came between them and parted them more effectually than any number of bolts and bars. They had never renewed their conversation about the marriage; he had often wished to do so, but had never ventured to introduce the subject in the

total absence of encouragement from Maryla.

To-day he was going to be bolder. When they should be seated together in that gloomy little hollow, between the Pike and Black Crag, he would demand and obtain an explanation of the whole mysterious affair. He would make it his business to see if nothing could be done ; for if there existed any possibility of making this girl his wife, his wife she should be. She should not leave the place until she had told him all he asked, promised all he wished.

In this mood, rather a dangerous one for Maryla, he followed the girl into this most solitary spot. The savage loneliness of the moors harmonized with his present frame of mind. He felt his heart harden against Maryla, even though he was going to tell her that he loved her,

and expected to hear that she loved him in return.

It was only when Maryla had reached the tarn, that she turned and saw Mr. Knox behind her. She frowned and looked at him for a moment without speaking, her dark eyes looking straight into his.

"You have followed me again," she said at last. "It becomes annoying when I cannot go out for a simple walk without being tracked as if I were a criminal."

"If I prefer to walk behind you instead of at your side, I suppose I may."

"I only ask you to let me know when you are coming. It is the secrecy and the discovery that I have been followed without my knowledge to which I object."

"I should hardly have expected to hear you objecting to secrecy."

"It is not very long since I suggested

the advisability of being prepared for anything."

"That is no answer at all, only an evasion."

"I was not aware an answer was necessary. But may I ask why you followed me up here? Scarcely to quarrel, I suppose."

"It depends upon you whether we quarrel or not."

"Then that question may, I think, be considered as set at rest," seating herself as she spoke at the place from which she got her favourite view across the valley. "So now, perhaps, you will go on to what you originally intended to say."

She looked up at him as she spoke with calmly indifferent eyes, her face expressing no more than a slight degree of curiosity about what he had come out to say. He felt that she must know why he had

followed her, and yet it was impossible to guess what she thought or felt.

His eyes were gloomy and angry. He loved Maryla passionately, and yet she tormented him sorely, and often made him feel very angry with her. To-day, however, he had promised himself that all should be made clear between them; so he beat down his rising anger, steadied his voice and said as calmly as he could,—

“I came out to ask you a question!”

“Only one? Was it worth while coming all this way to ask only one question?”

“One thing leads to another, and we may have to go through quite a long conversation before we have done.”

“In that case we had better begin at once or we may have to break off in the middle.”

“I had made up my mind that we would

not leave this place until we had thoroughly exhausted the subject."

"All the more reason for beginning; but do sit down, it is really displeasing to me when you persist in standing up. Sit down here, and we can talk more comfortably."

She laid her hand as she spoke, upon a stone close to her own seat, and at the same time she looked up at him with a smile which set his nerves thrilling. He seated himself at her bidding, and remained silent for a few seconds afterwards.

"Now your question?" she said in a tone of encouragement.

"I want you to tell me all about your marriage and your husband."

She laughed softly when he had spoken, and looked at him with an expression of critical amusement.

“You call that one question? If I chose to satisfy your curiosity, we might sit here talking till midnight, and I am not sure that we should have thoroughly exhausted the subject even then.”

“Why do you talk of my curiosity? as if I had no interest in the matter.”

“I do not see what interest you can have. What does it matter to you whether I am married or not? You can only want to know from curiosity. To put it quite plainly, what right have you to inquire into what I choose to keep private?”

She had brought things to a point now. The explanation could no longer be deferred; whether knowingly or unknowingly she had pulled the sword on to her own neck. Mr. Knox listened to her with his eyes fixed upon her face, and as he did not at once speak she went on,—

“If I had ever wished or thought it

necessary to tell you about my husband, I should have done so of my own accord. I think it is both ill-bred and impertinent of you to force the subject upon me as you do. Any man with the least penetration would have understood my silence."

"What do you mean by speaking like that?" he asked at length.

"What do you mean by speaking like that?" she retorted. "Any one who heard you would think you had some right over me."

"So I have, the right of the man who loves you."

"Oh," she answered slowly.

"And," he added with growing excitement, "the right of the man whom, unless for the last few days your whole life has been a lie, you love too."

She had not taken her eyes off his face

after repeating her question as to his right to address her, and her eyes still met his as she said,—

“Hush! you have no right to say that, nor I to hear it.”

“If you allowed me to show you my love all this time, I have a right to be heard now.”

“Since when,” she asked, “have I allowed you to make love to me?”

“Do you mean to say that you did not know I loved you?”

“I have lately thought your manner a little odd; so that was the meaning of it.”

“Dare you say you did not know?”

“How was I to think of such a thing? There was Marion.”

His gesture of repugnance was fierce as he answered,—

“Why do you drag her name in? It was not she I wanted, but you, and you

knew it. I might have been content with her once, if I had never seen you, but not now."

"It is a pity you cannot have what you want, but if there were no other obstacle, I do not love you."

She was very cool. She never took her eyes off his face. Just as long as she kept her eyes on his would he acknowledge her supremacy. Then, too, this was not, for her, the worst part of the battle. If she wished to be successful when that came she must have all her wits about her, and she was not at all afraid of Stephen, though he did just now look very like a madman, and the small deep tarn was dangerously near.

He was silent for a moment after she had spoken. He staggered under her words and drew his breath with a sharp gasp.

“Do not trifle with me,” he said at last ;
“I might lose my head if you tried me too far.”

“I am not trifling, I am speaking the truth.”

“Can you speak the truth? Dare you deny that during the last few days you have done everything you could to make me think you preferred me?”

“My manner is what it is. I cannot help it if you draw wrong inferences from it.”

“The usual excuse. To hear them talk, you would think women were all sleep-walkers, and perfectly unconscious of their own actions.”

“That is rather an ingenious idea; you will allow me to make a note of it.”

“Answer me,” he said almost roughly :
“dare you deny that you have lately given me to suppose that my society was interesting and agreeable to you?”

“How you harp upon one string! I do not deny it; I never did deny it. I only said you drew wrong inferences.”

“Then what was your reason?”

“It was so very different from the one you suppose, that I really hesitate to tell you.”

“I must know; you have gone too far to retract.”

“Understand once for all that there is no must in the matter. I tell you just as much as I choose, and because I choose. I did these things because I was studying your character to put into my novel.”

He stared at her for a moment, and then said in a voice which showed the immense restraint he was putting upon himself,—

“Will you repeat that; I cannot have heard aright.”

She repeated the last few words. When she had finished, he drew a deep breath.

“ Good God ! ” he said at last, “ do you mean that you deliberately led me on to love you when you had not a particle of feeling on your side ? ”

“ I deliberately led you on to nothing at all. You interested me, you had exactly the character of which I was then in want. I do not see many people here, I must work with the materials which fall in my way.”

“ You did that in cold blood,” he said, almost as in a dream ; “ are you a woman or a fiend ? ”

“ The usual cry,” she said, shrugging her shoulders, “ when men find women not quite so simple as they had expected.”

“ It is incredible,” he went on without heeding her, “ I cannot believe it. You are not telling me the truth, you do love me, and you are trying to put me off in that way. You must love me ; you have

as good as told me so over and over again."

"Take care what you are saying, I do not allow people to say those things to me. I never felt in the least attracted to you, and you forget that however much I might wish to think of you as something nearer than a friend, I am not at liberty to do so."

"Forget it? I have not forgotten it, it is always in my mind, I can think of nothing else. That is why I came here to-day. Miss Goldengay—Maryla—you must tell me the truth."

"Keep to Miss Goldengay, please. It may not be my real name, but it is the one by which I am known here. What do you mean by the truth? You do know it."

"Is it a fact that you are not at liberty to marry me?"

“How can I make it plainer to you than I have already done? Three years ago I was married in Haygarth Church to Maurice Wingfield. You have yourself seen the register; what more can I say?”

“Where is your husband? What is he? Why does he leave you here, and why did you part from him? Why did you part? That is the question I ask myself night and day. I want your answer now. Why did you part?”

“That is my secret.”

“Is there any reason why I should not know?”

“None, except that I do not choose to tell you.”

“I will find out, I will spend all my life in the search.”

“You cannot find out.”

“If I found your husband would he tell me?”

“Not if he knew I did not wish you to be told.”

“Does he love you?”

She half sighed and the sigh changed into a smile.

“Poor Maurice, yes, he loves me very much.”

“Did you leave him because of any crime he had committed?”

“He had committed no crime.”

“Whose suggestion was it that you should part?”

There was a slight pause before she answered,—

“It was his suggestion.”

“Did you leave him, or he you?”

“He left me.”

“Then the fault was on your side?”

“Yes, what fault there was.”

He could not altogether suppress a smile, but proceeded with his catechism.

“ Do you love him ? ”

“ No.”

“ Did you love him ? ”

“ I never loved him.”

“ Then why did you marry him ? ”

He was astonished at the effect of his question. She did not answer at once, her eyes fell, the colour rushed hotly all over her face, shame and confusion were written in every feature, her words when they did come were low and hesitating.

“ I could not tell you.”

He was silent. It was impossible to piece together what she said so as to make anything coherent out of it. The only things which had been established were that three years ago she had married secretly a man who loved her, but whose love she did not return. By his wish they had parted and had never met again.

The fault, "what there was of it," was on her side. He did not know what more to say, and he sat lost in thought. His excitement and passion had blazed out, his soul was weighed down by a depression which he could not shake off. He had so utterly failed in his undertaking. Since confessing to himself that he loved Maryla, he had been buoyed up by a vague hope that when he came to investigate the matter he would find some loophole by which she might escape from her ill-judged marriage; he had hoped more strongly during the last few days, believing that she would work with him, would be equally anxious to find she was free. It had come to an end, his house of cards had fallen down with almost ridiculous despatch. There was no loophole by which she might escape, neither did she wish to

escape. She had never loved him, but seeing his love for her and secure in her own position, she had amused herself with morally vivisectioning him. There was something unnatural about it, and it began to dawn upon him that there were depths in this girl's nature which he had not fathomed. He found that he knew no more about her than he had himself found out. She had answered his questions as directly as he had asked them, but she had told him nothing which would be of the slightest use to him. He tried to reconcile her almost incredible carelessness in both speech and action with the cold calculation and reticence which at other times she displayed. Then he reminded himself that she was not Miss Goldengay at all, but Mrs. Maurice Wingfield, and his heart once more grew hot with mingled anger

and longing. He turned to her again to renew the conversation.

This silence, which for him had been an interval of meditation, had for her been a time of momentary relaxation and then of mental bracing. One part of the battle was over; the other, and for her the severest, was yet to come. She had to summon all her strength and skill to her aid. She must lead her companion astray, make him believe that the worst was past, and that she had little to fear from what was coming. She sat arranging her forces and almost unconsciously fighting her battle. She had taken the attitude she instinctively took when reflecting upon anything. Her right hand hung loosely at her side, the long slender fingers almost resting on the ground. She was leaning slightly forward, her left elbow rested on her knee, and her chin was

supported on her palm. The warm colour having died out of her face, it was even paler than usual. Mr. Knox could not see her eyes, but from her attitude and the rest of her face, he imagined they must wear rather a dreary expression; the beautiful mouth was a little hard. What he read in her face caused him to change his mind; instead of speaking, he looked at her in silence, and then turned away and followed the direction of her eyes as they looked across the valley. Dark and lowering clouds alone met his view, and the lake was blotted out. The transient brilliance of the early afternoon had faded like his hopes. The mists had come down over the Pike, and the old giant loomed dimly athwart them. The silence of the moors was unbroken; close to them the little lake glimmered like a dark eye swimming in tears. In all that

wide expanse they were the only human beings. Without knowing why, he began to think of this place as it must have looked at midnight when Maryla came here, and then his thoughts turned to the following morning when, surrounded by sunshine and blue sky, Maryla had told him the story of her life, or—he reminded himself with some bitterness—as much of it as she had chosen to tell. Then he was back in the present as they sat in the mists and gloom, with strife and enmity as well as love in their hearts. When he looked again at the girl at his side, he felt more compassion than anger. She must be unhappy; it could not be otherwise, and his love swallowed up all other feelings, and he felt his heart stir with infinite pity and tenderness for her.

Suddenly she turned to him and spoke.

The gloomy look had vanished from her face, and her voice sounded quite cheerful.

“Now,” she said, “there remains only one thing for you to do. You must go and tell Mr. Richardson everything.”

“What do you mean by ‘everything’?”

“What we have just been talking about.”

Her change of manner had jarred upon him. The proposal she now made irritated him still more, and he replied,—

“Your ‘everything’ is not very comprehensive. It does not, I presume, include all we have said about your marriage, and an evilly-disposed person might have taken your words literally.”

“How do you know I did not intend you to take them literally?”

“What do you mean? Do you want me to tell him about your marriage?”

“Are you going to tell him?” she asked almost eagerly.

“I don’t understand. Do you want me to tell him?”

“If you would.”

“Not long ago you gave me a number of reasons why you did not wish him to know.”

“That is ever so long ago now.”

“Do not the same reasons still exist?”

“Everything has changed. To begin with, I have been clever enough to make you into an enemy, and I confess I do not like to think of an enemy having in his possession such a weapon as I gave you when we first spoke of this. I think I must have been a little mad at the time. I do not any longer feel disposed to go through life with a halter round my neck, and feeling myself in the power of somebody else. I daresay you would never have

thought of such a thing if I had not suggested it to you, and I must have lost my head a little before I was so foolish as to let you into such a secret. To be quite candid, I have given you a little encouragement. I thought you were a fit subject for an experiment I wanted to make, and I could not resist making it. All the time you were speaking this afternoon, I would have given anything to recall the idea I had suggested to you. You have relieved me immensely by saying you may tell now."

"But I understood that you had your own personal reasons for wishing him not to know."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I am tired of my secret; it is rather dull having a secret quite to oneself, and when you are gone, no one will know of this but myself. Then the secret itself

oppresses me; it is the only one I have ever had, and secrecy is foreign to my nature. I do not think it agrees with me. Mr. Richardson would be hurt at first, but when I had explained matters to him he would forgive me and we should be better friends than ever. He would take the affair in hand, and take steps to bring my husband and me together—after all it was a very little thing that parted us. Matters would be patched up between Maurice and myself, and though I should have to subside into ordinary married life with a man whom I do not love, and give up the idea of being a celebrated novelist, at least I should feel safe, I should have done with secrets, and not feel as if I were living on the edge of a volcano. I have not courage to tell Mr. Richardson myself, but if you did it for me, I should simply have to fall into the arrangement.”

She paused, looking up at him with eyes which were like two dark deep wells of feeling, and lips parted in a smile half protesting, half imploring. If her mother could have seen her now, she would have felt very proud of her. Mr. Knox, as he looked down upon her, felt his head swim, the soft fire of her glance stole into his veins and thrilled him through. One by one he had followed the images she had called up, and as she mentioned her husband, spoke of him by name, he clenched his hands with rage. While there is life, there is hope, so long as she was not actually openly the wife of another man, he could believe in some wild chance which might make her his wife. At the sight of her upturned velvet eyes and parted lips, the blood rushed to his face, his heart beat violently, and red spots danced before his eyes.

“If you want your guardian to know,” he said hoarsely, “you must take your courage in both hands, and tell him yourself. I will have no hand in it.”

Even as he spoke, her face changed, the smile faded, her eyes fell. She said nothing for a moment; then she raised her eyebrows slightly, saying,—

“Then I suppose I must continue to live on the edge of the volcano?”

“Or get some one else to save you from it.”

There was a silence of some length, and then she said,—

“Mr. Richardson must know of this; at least, you will not leave that to me.”

“Why must he know?”

“I will never have another secret from him, and there is another reason. Go now, and tell him all.”

“ You will walk back to the village with me ? ”

“ I will go home when I think you are gone. ”

“ Am I not to see you again ? ”

“ No ! ”

“ Do not speak so inflexibly. It is quite possible we may never meet again here, but I am certain we shall at some future time. The mere fact of the secret between us will draw us together, and when you are free I shall be near you. ”

“ In that case we will say ‘ *au revoir*. ’ ”

“ You make a jest of everything now ; perhaps you will be in a different mood when we meet again. ”

“ *Au revoir*, ” she repeated, and he turned and left her.

She looked after him until his figure was lost in the mist, then she returned

to her seat and leaned back, closing her eyes. She was trembling a little, and she drew two or three long sighs.

Presently she rose to her feet and stood on the brink of the tarn, looking into its black depth.

“That is over,” she said half aloud, “and I am glad of it, for I knew it must come. I knew I could make him keep silence if I appealed to the worst part of his nature. It was rather a desperate thing to do. If I had overacted one word or look, he would have seen what my real fear was, and he would have told. If he had told, the shock would have killed Mr. Richardson, and I, I, of all people, should have had his death to answer for. He shall never know of that marriage,—if I choke with falsehoods, he shall never know. If he knew it had led to that, he would never forgive himself, though he

would forgive me. That is it; he would forgive me, and never forgive himself."

She made a long pause. Her face was very pale, there was a dreary look in her eyes, and her mouth drooped mournfully. Then she began to speak again.

"And I had to plead fear to the solemn column! So I am afraid, horribly afraid, but for Mr. Richardson, not for myself. When I begin to tremble for my own safety, it will be time to give up the battle. But suppose he tells after all! Why did I send him to Mr. Richardson? I wish I knew what he would say. I must go home. No, I cannot meet him again. I must wait till he has gone. When are the trains, oh, when are the trains?"

The house-door was shut when she reached home, and she leaned against the verandah as she waited for the maid to let

her in. The girl looked at her a little curiously and said,—

“Master told me to ask you to go to him in the study, Miss.”

She stepped into the house in silence. She could not speak, her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth and her throat was dry. She took off her hat and laid it on the hall table; then she went to the study, and, contrary to her custom, knocked at the door before going in.

Mr. Richardson was writing in his usual place. She moved across the room almost noiselessly, and stood before him, saying,—

“Ellen told me you wanted me!”

He looked at her as she spoke. Despite her wonderful self-command, she could not speak in her usual voice, neither did her eyes meet his.

“Yes, my dear,” he replied. “But sit

down. How pale you are! Of course this is very annoying, but you must not suppose for an instant that I hold you at all to blame."

He did not know! The relief was almost too great. A mist came before her eyes and she put her hand upon the writing-table, she dare not move. Mr. Richardson, seeing her emotion, got a chair and made her seat herself.

"You are quite upset," he said, smiling. "I am afraid he alarmed you, and of course you were not prepared for such a declaration."

She had recovered her self-possession and answered with a smile,—

"It was rather formidable. We were quite alone, and once or twice he looked so fierce, I almost thought he was going to throw me into the water."

"You are better now, that is right ;

just wanted to speak to you about it because it is rather an awkward affair. Marion—”

“Well,” as he paused, “what does Marion say?”

“She seems to take it very much to heart, though from what she said, I gathered that for some time she has suspected him of want of faith. But the extraordinary part is that she persists in asserting that you have all the time been aware of his preference for you, and have done your utmost to encourage him. Of course I did my utmost to get the idea out of her mind, but she is very determined, and I wanted to prepare you a little.”

She rose impulsively from her chair and raised his hand to her cheek.

“What a delightful man you are, and how different from our worthy friend the

column. You always thought better of me than I deserved, and now the disproportion between your esteem and my deserts is embarrassing."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Marion is right. I did see that the column was transferring his valuable affections from her to me, and I did deliberately lead him on."

"Is that really so?" he asked in a voice of some distress.

"Yes. I would not have troubled you with such a confession, but I thought you ought to know."

"I am very sorry to hear it."

She did not speak, but looked down at the carpet.

"What made you do it?" he asked at last.

"I had two reasons: one was that I had been studying his character, and I

wanted to make experiments upon him. You cannot imagine what an interesting occupation that is. It is like planning a game of chess in your head and seeing all your theories come out right."

He smiled a little dubiously, both at her words and the tone of enthusiasm in which they were spoken.

"We will talk about that later. Let me hear your second reason."

"The second reason is that, having learned all I could from him, I grew tired to death of him and his solemnity. He bored me beyond description, and my one object was to get rid of him as soon as possible."

He bit his lips to hide a smile as he asked,—

"Well?"

"So I brought matters to a crisis as soon as I could. I knew that when they

had reached the point they have done, he would have to go."

"And now you have attained your object?"

"I hope so. He has gone, I suppose."

"Yes, he has gone. Your plan was excellent, and thoroughly womanly. In some ways, Maryla, you are wonderfully like your mother."

She said nothing, and he went on,—

"Could you not have compassed your object without wrecking Marion's hopes?"

"I did not wreck them. I gave him no encouragement until I saw that, as far as Marion was concerned, it would be all the same whether I gave him encouragement or not. You must have seen that he had given up all idea of asking her to marry him."

"Yes, I must confess you are right."

There was a pause and then she laughed and said,—

“Poor Marion! I am sorry for her disappointment. She did so want to get married.”

Mr. Richardson was silent, and she went on,—

“And I am sorry for our disappointment; we did so want her to get married.”

“You are speaking of my daughter, Maryla.”

“Ah, yes, I had forgotten; blood is, after all, thicker than water.”

She turned away to the window as she spoke, and her words were followed by a silence. Mr. Richardson looked after her for a time, then he rose, and, standing behind her, put his two hands upon her shoulders. He did not say anything, neither did she, but when they had stood for a minute in this way, she put up one

of her hands, and without looking round drew one of his to her lips, which she pressed lightly against it. After this, they turned away from the window and seated themselves on the chairs they had occupied before.

“What did he tell you?” asked Maryla.

“I believe he told me the truth, and he expressed regret on Marion’s account. I do not think there was anything more to say.”

“Did she see him before he went?”

“No, I thought it better not.”

“You were right, I think. It would have been a harrowing scene and have done no earthly good. I suppose you sent for her and told her about it.”

He nodded and she went on,—

“She will never forgive me of course, that we must not expect, but I do hope, for your sake, she will not be very

unbending. How did she take it? was she angry, or grieved, or majestic, or what?"

There was a touch of sadness in his voice as he replied,—

"I do not seem to have her confidence. I fear it is partly my own fault. I have not encouraged her to open her heart to me. She would tell me nothing, her face was like a mask, only she spoke very hardly of you. It was from Ethel I learned that she feels it very much."

She rose to go, but he stopped her, saying,—

"Just one word first, my love. You seem inclined to let your zeal run away with you; try to guard against that. It might another time expose you to much greater danger and serious misapprehension."

"I daresay, but when I am really inte-

rested, I forget to take precautionary measures.”

“ Give me warning and I will take them for you,” drawing his finger down her cheek as he spoke.

CHAPTER X.

“The love and duty that I bear you.”

MARYLA'S fears were realized ; Marion was unbending. She had gone to her room after hearing what her father had to tell her, and under the plea of a headache had not left it again that day. On the following morning she had resumed her usual place in the house, looking only a little paler than was her wont. She never made any allusion to the departed guest. She spoke to her father and sister in her accustomed tone and manner, but she ceased to have any intercourse with Maryla. Nothing would have induced her to address a single

word to the girl who, she believed, had of set purpose, out of pure malice and wickedness, destroyed her happiness. She had vowed to herself that her hand should never touch Maryla's; she would not even look at her, if she met her on the stairs or in the passages, she stood aside lest even their clothing should come in contact. Maryla was scarcely either surprised or distressed. She would have let bygones be bygones and have behaved as though nothing had happened. When she saw the attitude Marion took, she shrugged her shoulders and let her have her way. But she was not long in finding out that this estrangement was exceedingly distressing to Mr. Richardson; it caused him both pain and anxiety; he worried over it and his health grew worse. He could not insist upon Marion keeping up an appearance of harmony because he could not now assert that

Maryla was altogether innocent in the matter. He had a slight attack, and Maryla, alarmed, put aside her own feelings and asked Marion to appear, at least in the presence of her father, as if she had forgotten. Marion stared in rather haughty silence. Then Maryla parted with her cherished secret, and said that Mr. Richardson was far from strong and that this unfortunate affair with its results had not been calculated to give him mental repose. Ethel was present, and Marion turned to her saying,—

“I should think we ought to know the state of papa’s health best, should not you, Ethel? He never complains and he looks well. I do not think we need feel alarmed.”

Upon this, Maryla had, contrary to her custom, grown angry, and said,—

“You must do as you please about it,

only when the time comes, do not say I did not give you warning."

That attempt having failed, she made up her mind to speak to Mr. Richardson about a plan which had lately suggested itself to her. Since the day of Mr. Knox's departure, he had never been mentioned by either her or her guardian; he was too much pained by the whole occurrence, and perhaps he felt it a little hard that in these difficult and painful circumstances it was his ward and not his daughter who had shown the truer love for him. Maryla scarcely troubled the sisters; when in the house, she sat habitually in his study, and at table, while speaking less than usual, what she said was addressed wholly to him; but even when they were alone, they never spoke of the column, and so Maryla had to employ all her resolution to speak of the tacitly forbidden subject and of the

plan which she had formed as she thought of it in her walks over the hills and her silent watching of the dying year.

One morning she went into the study, and going up to where Mr. Richardson was bending over the writing-table, she gave a little caressing pull to his hair and said,—

“I want you to come out with me.”

“It does not seem to have occurred to you that I may not be able to come.”

“You are coming. I want to talk to you, and you know I can never say what I mean so well in the house as out of doors.”

“You mean you cannot be so persuasive. That may be true, there is something about you which seems in harmony with nature. If you ever have to refuse a lover, take my advice and do it in the house, out of doors he would never consent

to give up hope; you always look your very best in the open air."

"You have forgotten the column."

"The column! I had decided we would never mention that man's name again."

"So had I, but I think we shall have to break our vow. It is not exactly about him, but in connection with him, that I want to talk to you now."

"Oh, well, in that case, we had better go out of doors."

She got him into the hall, gave him his hat, helped him on with his coat, searched for his stick in the umbrella-stand, and at last led him away captive, as he said, into the garden.

"Where are we going to?" he asked.

"I thought of the moors on the other side of the lake, if that will not be too far for you."

"I can manage it very well to-day, this

wonderful air puts new life into me, and I feel capable of much."

"You begin to understand the feeling of immortality which I have in fine bright weather or when things have gone very well with me. At such times I feel like a bird, as if I weighed about a quarter of a pound and could fly if any one lifted me from the ground. Of course trouble and worry seem no longer to exist."

"You are a marvellous creature," he replied, pressing the hand which she had slipped under his arm.

They did not speak of Mr. Knox until they were seated in a warm sunny place on the heather, with the calm lake below them, the Pike rising grandly on the opposite side, and all around the woods in the pomp and glory of autumn. The scene was one of surpassing peace and

beauty, the stillness so intense it seemed a sacrilege to break it.

Maryla felt as if she could not speak, her motive in making this proposition might so easily be misunderstood. It was only the conviction that she and her guardian understood one another perfectly which made it possible for her to speak at all. She scarcely knew whether she wanted Mr. Richardson to grant her request or not, but in the trust that he would rightly understand her motive in speaking, she was going to make it. The first words were difficult to say, and Mr. Richardson, suddenly rousing himself as though from a dream, asked—

“What did you want to talk to me about?”

“About the way in which Marion behaves ; it distresses you, does it not?”

He looked at her with rather an enigmatical smile as he answered,—

“ My dear, you surprise me ; I know that your acquaintance with the Bible is only limited, but you may have heard a saying, which runs thus, ‘ Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots ? ’ ”

“ Well ? ”

“ Well, under given circumstances, it is Marion’s nature to behave in a certain way, and my nature to be distressed at her behaviour. Unless you change the conditions you cannot change the results.”

“ You speak as if the conditions were unchangeable.”

“ And you, as if you proposed to change them.”

“ How do you know that ? ”

“ You must know what a sore Marion’s conduct makes in my heart. I do not

think you would have deliberately touched that sore unless you had a remedy to propose."

" 'Sir,' " she quoted, " 'it is proper to inform you that our measures *must be healing.*' I am going to propose a healing measure. I have caused Marion the greatest disappointment she has ever had. As long as we are together she will never forget it, and as long as she does not forget it, she will behave as she is doing now. This is very bad for you; it is destroying your peace and health. The only cure is for one of us to go away. Marion has a right to stay, so I propose that I go."

She had purposely spoken briefly and plainly. She would not by word, or look, or tone betray her own inclinations, or influence her companion. Sure though she felt of the result, passionately fond

though she was of Mr. Richardson, she could not resist experimenting on her knowledge of his character, and having spoken, she waited in suspense for his answer.

“To go away from here is rather vague ; explain a little what you mean.”

“I cannot stay here always, as you know. Some time I shall have to go and try my fortune in the world. You know what our plan was, that I should live in some town and write my novels. We had counted upon my taking the first steps from the safety and obscurity of Standedale. My plan is that, instead of waiting until I must go, I take the occasion by the hair and go now.”

It was impossible to keep her voice quite steady. At the last words it shook perceptibly. The unsteadiness might be attributed either to painful emotion at the

thought of leaving her home and the one person to whom she was attached, or to the irresistible excitement of anticipating her new life. Her eyes, as she spoke, did not meet those of her companion.

She knew she had said a bold thing. The greatest stranger might give her credit for filial feeling and attachment, and a sincere wish to promote the peace of the household at the expense of her own happiness. Her warmest friend and well-wisher, knowing her nature, might be excused for divining in her proposal the expression of a hidden wish which gratitude and affection had hitherto caused her to keep to herself, and which she took this first and favourable opportunity of openly manifesting.

There was silence when she had finished speaking. She was seated so that her companion could see her face plainly, and

read every expression which appeared upon it. But he could not see one hand which she had buried in the heather, and her fingers were grasping the tough, springy stalks ready to tear the root from the ground.

“So that is your plan?”

“Yes; this cannot go on for ever; it would wear you out. One of us must go, and for every reason I am the one.”

He bent his head, and looked into her face.

“Do you for one moment believe that I shall let you go?”

She did not raise her eyes, but her mouth trembled almost imperceptibly at the corner. For half a second it seemed as if she were going to smile, but she repressed it, and said,—

“Some time, you know, it will have to happen.”

“Then, some time, it may, but during my life you shall never go! Do you for one instant imagine that because Marion behaves like a child for the loss of a man from whom she ought to be glad to be delivered, that therefore you are to go away, to be turned out of my house and sent into the world as if you had committed some crime? My child,” his tone softening as he took her hand, “you shall never have that act of injustice to reproach me with.”

“I knew you would say that; but, remember, I proposed this for your sake. If Marion does not change something must be done. You cannot go on longer like this.”

“If, after I have spoken to Marion this evening, she does not change, it is she who will have to go. I will not have you driven away.”

“ You would do better not to speak ; it will only make matters worse. She will think I have been complaining, and will hate me more. Besides, you would have to keep your word, and if your daughter were sent away that I might be made more comfortable, what would people say ? Then, remember, I do not care for myself whether she smiles or frowns upon me.”

“ You shall not go ! What, in the name of fortune, should I do without you ? ”

“ Come with me. Leave Marion and Ethel here. They will be perfectly safe, and we can go and live a vagabond life and be as happy as beggars.”

“ A brilliant suggestion upon my word. Since you have developed a regard for public opinion, tell me what ‘ people would say ’ if I were to leave my two daughters to live unprotected, while I went to watch over my ward in town ? ”

“They would say that, considering the respective characters of the daughters and the ward, you had shown a remarkable degree of common sense.”

“No, they would not. That is just what they ought to say, so they would take very good care not to say it.”

“At any rate you would have the soothing consciousness that you had done right.”

“Ah, now ! there is some sense in that. Since we are speaking about these things, I may as well tell you that I hate the thought of your living alone ; you are not in the least fit for it.”

“Why not ? ”

“There is that peculiarity you have which prompts you to prostrate yourself, figuratively speaking, before any one who has been kind to you. It is a very attractive feature in your character, the more so

because you are often unreasonably hard to people who have the misfortune not to please you ; but it will be of little practical use, nay, rather in your way, in the course of your battle with the world. You ought to have someone with you to guard you against yourself."

"How wise you are ! about how many people do you suppose I shall meet, who will be kind to me ?"

"One will be enough to do all the necessary damage."

"Then I am not to go away before I must."

"Only by your own wish."

He spoke gravely, but there was no tone of inference in his voice. It evidently did not occur to him to suspect any hidden purpose in what she had said.

"There are one or two other matters upon which I should like to speak to you,"

said Mr. Richardson presently, "we may not have so good an opportunity again."

"Your tone tells me there are business matters, so let us get them over by all means; you know business is not my forte."

"Facts and figures are naturally distasteful to you, certainly, though your head is so clear. One thing is about my will. We were speaking a little time ago of your share of my money. Are you still of that opinion?"

"Yes, and you too, I suppose."

"You are right, I want you to have a third."

"I will not have a third. Do you not see that, if you leave me equal with your daughters, it will embitter them against you, and make you a subject of strife, and I will not have you made a subject of strife. If you will leave me a hundred a year,

I shall be very grateful to you, and I shall be independent. With that certain, I shall have no need to write pot-boilers, and it will be a pleasure to owe that to you. But, if you love me, let it be no more."

"A hundred a year is such a pittance."

"It is independence. Besides, you forget that I am going to make a vast fortune with my novels. Before long, your hundred a year will have sunk to the proportions of a mere seed to keep my memory green for you. Four times a year, at any rate, I shall think of you. You will scarcely ask more than that."

"I am greedy, I exact a thought for every day."

"You unreasonable old man! and like most unreasonable people, I have no doubt you will get what you want."

"Good girl."

"And now the other thing?"

“The other thing is less simple, but you have lately shown me that it is necessary.”

“How solemnly you speak! I feel quite nervous.”

“It is I who feel nervous for you. I want to warn you against the zeal with which you pursue your art. Try not to be so reckless in your studies; you are so unutterably, fearfully careless. Some day, if you are not more prudent, you will bring some great disaster upon yourself or somebody else.”

“I hope sincerely it may be somebody else.”

“So do I, but be serious for one moment. You laugh now, you are young and strong, with every confidence in your own skill and firmness. But you have had a little lesson which ought to teach you that you cannot probe a man's inner-

most nature, and lead him through every phase of emotion, with impunity. Such a practice is—for a woman—literally playing with fire; sometime you will be scorched in your turn.”

“I do not know whether I am scorchable.”

“Don’t you, don’t you; are you sure? I do. I can imagine you passionately in love, and I hope I may be alive when the time comes. Only take care it is with the right man. For heaven’s sake don’t marry out of *pique* or gratitude, and then find you have made some wretched mistake which you will never be able to set right. It would be the greatest folly of which you could be guilty.”

She coloured deeply, and then went very pale. After a moment’s silence, she laughed gaily, saying,—

“I should be very sorry for the unfor-

fortunate man who was the victim of my folly ; should not you ? ”

“Extremely, I am speaking as much for his sake as for yours.”

“I thank you in his name. Seriously though, I must work in my own way. When I see a man falling in love with me I cannot resist trying him, and leading him as far as he will go, I mean, in the interests of my art.”

“I don’t like it; if you are speaking seriously, you ought not to live alone.”

“I am speaking seriously, but you may trust me. Nothing more than I choose will ever happen to me.”

“For heaven’s sake take care what you are doing,” he said nervously.

She burst out laughing as she replied,—

“Heaven and I are strangers, but if

you really care about it, I will try to be careful."

*

*

*

*

This was almost the last conversation about such things which they had. Early in the winter Mr. Richardson's health began to fail. In spite of every care he grew weaker, and in the spring he died. As soon as he was dead, Maryla left the room and never entered it again in the daytime. But Marion and Ethel knew that, as soon as every one had gone to bed, she returned to the room where the dead man lay, and stayed there till morning. On the day of the funeral she went out early, and did not come home till late in the evening when it was already dark.

END OF VOL. I.





UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 045843999

